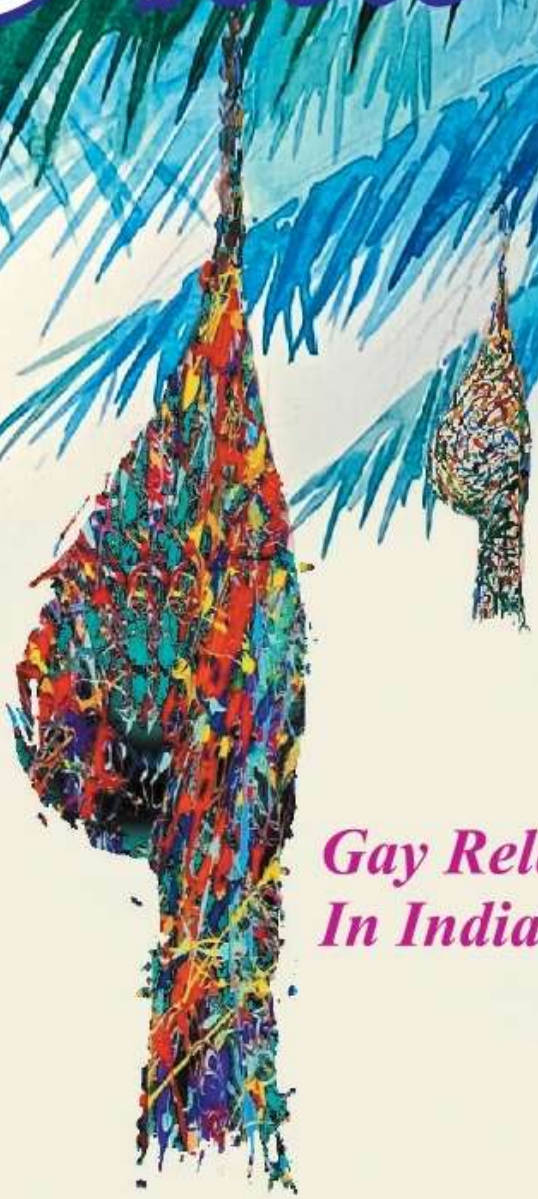
Rainbow Nests



Gay Relationships In India

Bindumadhav Khire

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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to

The Hon'ble Supreme Court Justice Sanjay Kishan Kaul

The only Judge on the Constitution Bench

Who ruled in our favour

In the gay marriage case (which we lost 4:1)*.

*[Supriyo Chakraborty & Anr Versus Union of India] (Writ Petition (Civil) No. 1011 of 2022)

NOTE OF THANKS

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Bindumadhav Khire

August 2025
Pune

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Preface

From the time I wrote my first novella, *Partner* (in Marathi), in 2004, till the time when I wrote my memoir *No Man's Land- Memoir of a Gay Activist* (in English) in 2020, I wrote and edited a few anthologies (in Marathi) in between- *Antaranga* (Experience sharing by Gays and Lesbians), *Saptaranga* (Experience sharing by Transgenders), *Manachiye Gunti* (Experience sharing by Parents of Gays and Lesbians). The focus in all of these was coming to terms with sexuality or gender and coming out of the closet.

All these years, I have known gay couples, but they all lived under the fear of Section 377 of the IPC (1860), which criminalised consensual same-sex intercourse between adults.

The Supreme Court Judgment of September 6, 2018, in the case of [Navtej Singh Johar & Ors. v/s Union of India] (WP (Criminal) No. 76 of 2016) was a paradigm shift. A five-judge Constitution Bench of the Supreme Court ruled that Section 377 of the IPC was unconstitutional to the extent that it criminalised same-sex intercourse between consenting adults.

Instead of drafting the Section as intended by the Judgment, the Bharatiya Nyay Sanhita, 2023 (BNS - the revised Indian Penal Code) omitted the Section entirely, thereby creating a new headache. Since that is not directly the topic of discussion, I will not dwell on it anymore.

The Supreme Court Judgment meant that any two adults could enter into a consensual relationship, irrespective of their biological sex, sexual orientation or gender identity.

As more and more gay individuals entered into relationships, I encountered an increasing number of same-sex couples who faced a variety of challenges in their relationships. Some

were related to interpersonal dynamics, but many also faced external challenges, such as parents aggressively opposing such relationships.

While a consensual same-sex relationship between two adults is not illegal, it does not carry any legal recognition. It hence has no legal protection (e.g., protection provided under 'The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act' (2005). This Act provides protection to a woman in a live-in relationship with a man against domestic violence; as of August 2025, the same is not available to a female in the case of a same-sex couple.)

It is in this background that the gay marriage case [Supriyo Chakraborty & Anr Versus Union of India] (Writ Petition (Civil) No. 1011 of 2022) was fought in the Supreme Court. The case challenged the constitutionality of the Special Marriage Act, 1954 and the Foreign Marriage Act, 1969, because they did not apply to same-sex couples.

Tragically, the Supreme Court Judgment of 2023 went against gay couples. We lost 4:1.* The Judgment, granted legal recognition to a marriage between two persons of different genders (e.g. marriage between a man and a transgender, transman and a woman etc.), but did not grant that right to two persons belonging to same genders i.e. two men or two women desiring to get married.

It goes without saying that despite the non-recognition of same-sex relationships by law, many gays and lesbians continue to make immense efforts to find a long-term partner or work hard in making their relationships work in a hostile environment. As an LGBTIQ activist, I have known many same-sex couples, and seen the social and legal challenges they continue to face, from up close. I strongly felt that their stories of love and resilience in the face of formidable challenges needed to be documented and heard. Hence, I undertook the initiative to document some of their stories.

Objectives

Firstly, to present a counterpoint to the straight, sanctimonious perception that for gays, it's all about sex and nothing else. That, for gays, it's one big orgy all lifelong. That, they don't have compassion, affection, or desire to nurture a family like straights have.

For a few gays, it is true, as it is true for some straight men and women too. But this stereotype about gays (especially men) is so prevalent and voiced so assertively by straight persons that quite a few gays have imbibed that line of thought. This is a small effort to challenge that stereotype.

Secondly, I would like to reiterate what I have been saying all these years: that when it comes to relationships, it's a combination of love and numerous compromises. We, gay men and women, are not really any different from straight couples; many of the challenges we face are the same, with the additional challenge of not having legal recognition. And, to top it all, the associated stigma and social ostracism.

Thirdly, I hope that the book will provide some food for thought on the issues that need to be considered by gay youths seeking long-term relationships.

Fourthly, to highlight the fact that our law of the land and our society, in the year 2025, continues to regard same-sex relationships as sub-par. Shame! Shame!!

Last but not least, to pay my tribute to all the same-sex couples who keep fighting to build their nests against all odds!

A note on limitations of the book

I canvassed quite a few same-sex couples. Some couples didn't respond to my request to be interviewed despite my offer for them to use an alias. Some initially agreed and then stopped communicating altogether. So, the book took much

longer to materialise than I had expected.

I made it a point to interview only those same-sex couples I could meet in person.

As my Mom is bedridden and I had to take care of her, I faced severe limitations on travelling out of the station. So, my selection of same-sex couples, barring the exception of Nitin & Thomas (from Mumbai), is limited to those I could interview in Pune.

Lastly, as the stories of these couples continue to evolve, I had to set an end date for tracking their journey; that date is the last date of their respective interviews.

Bindumadhav Khire
August 2025
Pune

**Previously, in 2013, the Supreme Court had let us down by striking down the sterling Judgment, of the Delhi High Court, by Hon'ble Justice Ajit Prakash Shah and S. Muralidhar, given in 2009, wherein Section 377 of IPC was declared unconstitutional to the extent that it criminalised same-sex intercourse between consenting adults ([Naz Foundation versus Government of NCT of Delhi and Others] (WP(C) 7455/2001)).*

•••

Bindumadhav

(Reproduction of the chapter 'Devdas' from my autobiography No Man's Land- Memoir of a Gay Activist)

"It's over", I said to Mom amidst tears. "Such things never last", my Mom tersely replied and left my bedroom. No sympathy there. Although Mom accepted my sexuality, she was very uncomfortable seeing me with a male lover. Not that he had ever slept overnight in my bedroom; in fact, I had got him over only once for dinner before it was all over, barely lasting a couple of months.

The breakup hit me hard because it was my first love with a gay man, though, to date, I do not know whether he reciprocated my feelings. On the wrong side of forty, I was quite desperate to be with someone and had fallen head over heels for the young man working at my NGO.

Yes, it is extremely unprofessional of me. I had gone to the extent of financially helping him set up a shop, which I trashed in anger after the breakup. Knowing my uncontrollable fury, I can credit myself with managing to control my restlessness and frustration and not harm him in anger.

The next few months were a nightmare. My depression and pain drove me crazy with grief, wondering where I had gone wrong. I became the lovelorn gay teetotaller *Devdas* (a famous character from the Indian film of the same name, in which a jilted lover becomes a drunkard and wallows in self-pity. There have been multiple films devoted to the theme.)

During those days, it was my staff at Samapathik Trust, Tinesh and Sachin, who took care of me. I would call them at any time, meet them and cry my heart out (very unprofessional of me.) I guess they pitied me, an older man making a fool of himself for a young man. They had known all along that this was a dead-end street; I was, as generally is the case in such matters, the last one to figure it out.

Unable to bear the pain, I approached psychiatrist Dr. Bhooshan Shukla. He took one look at my hunched posture and could see what I was going through. Sitting in front of him, crying like a baby, felt good, but that was not enough. I had to go on medication. I knew that despite the side effects, the sooner I started the medicines, the better, as they would take their own sweet time to take effect, but till they began blunting my emotions, two to three weeks down the road, it was hell. I started seeking S&M partners who could inflict pain on me. On one occasion, I remember that I nearly got laid without a condom, wishing that I had got HIV and died of it; at the last moment, better sense prevailed. One part of my mind wondered why I was doing this to myself, and the other wondered why I should not. Pleasuring myself for relief from the stress was of no use. The result was anaesthetic ejaculation.

It was a few months before I was able to get out of it. The progress was slow. I wonder whether my staff lost their respect for me; I guess so, at least to some degree. Well, it could have been worse. And the experience did make me stronger. As I struggled to come to terms with the loss, I surmised that I was a success when I was into activism and the world's biggest loser when seeking love. Therefore, it made sense for me to focus on one area where I was ahead of the game and let go of the other (the reader is welcome to disagree with my decision.) Since then, I have never sought out a relationship. No, I can't say I'm happier about that, but I can say that, due to the absence of Cupid's complications, I can focus on my work without distraction.

Lastly, it gave me invaluable insight into my clients' feelings when they sat desolately crying in front of me in befriending sessions. On a couple of occasions during these befriending sessions, I found myself being transported back to the unbearable longing and pain of being in love. The long, languorous drives in the rains, at night on my bike, him

snuggling close to me, his hands clasping my waist, to the warmth of his room and his welcoming arms. Been there, done that, done in.

•••

Sumeet

Interviewer's commentary:
It was just 10.30 am, and the heat was sweltering. I was drenched in sweat. It was March, and we still had at least 2.5 months to go before the onset of rain and some respite from the high temperatures. I wondered how bad it would be in May. As I called Sumeet and waited for him to show up, I tried in vain to find a tree for shade.

Other than a couple of visits to a corporate office for DEI sessions in June, the LGBTIQ Pride month, I had no reason to come to this part of the ever-expanding city.

I have known Sumeet for a few years, but we have met on very few occasions. He was from another state, having moved to Pune for a job about eight years ago and settled there.

During the COVID pandemic, he was a great help. With the lockdown in place, quite a few LGBT community members had a tough time. This was especially true of transgenders who made their living by asking for alms on the street. With their source of earnings cut off, they desperately needed rations to survive. One of my transgender colleagues owned an autorickshaw. I hired her and her driver to distribute ration to transgenders in Pune and PCMC. Two volunteers, who had travel passes from the Pune Municipal Corporation, assisted in purchasing rations, and identifying transgenders for ration distribution. Retd. ACP Bhanupratap Barge sir readily agreed to help us in case the autorickshaw was detained at police check-posts.

We initiated a fundraising drive and used the funds to distribute rations to those in need. Amongst those who provided generous financial support for this exercise was Sumeet. His company wanted to donate funds to an NGO for COVID-19 relief, and he recommended my organisation's

name. With the funds received, we purchased rations, prepared kits, distributed them via the autorickshaw, took photos of the masked beneficiaries receiving the ration kits, and sent the details to the company.

On the day of the interview, Sumeet showed up about 15 minutes later in his car. Is he looking a bit thinner than he usually does? I wondered. He was dark-skinned, not very fastidious about clothes and easy to get along with.

I parked my bike nearby and got into his car. Sitting in his car with the A/C on full blast, it felt like heaven. As he worked out the logistics of going to a place where we could unwind, I wondered how to start the conversation.

When I contacted him a year ago to interview him and his partner, he readily agreed. But it took a while. I got a Dengue infection, and Mom was not keeping well either. Other interviews that were already lined up took time, so by the time I contacted him in February 2025, he informed me that the couple had broken up after three years of being in a relationship.

I wondered if I should speak with him, or should I inform him that I needed to interview couples? I gave it some thought and decided to meet him to hear about his experiences and views on relationships in general, well aware that it would be a one-sided view.

What follows next is Sumeet's views and experiences, which he narrated in a series of interviews that I conducted over a couple of weekends, chatting for hours at one of his favourite breakfast places. At his request, all the names used in the story are aliases.

—

Interviewer's commentary:
I should not have worried about where to start. As soon as he set the location tracker for the restaurant and we took off for the place, he opened up.

Sumeet: The first time I got in touch with Pratik was before COVID through a dating app. I was flirting online with him and one other man at that time. But I didn't date either of them for a while. Finally, I chose one, but he turned out to be too clingy. Being too clingy on a first date makes me very uncomfortable. *Arre yaar* (buddy), it takes time to know and understand a person. You can't just go on a first date and assume that I've found my true love; I'm going to move in with this guy—*aisa hota nahi hai* (that's not how it works.) With great difficulty, I managed to get rid of him and decided to date Pratik.

But before I met Pratik in person for the first time, I had to go on an out-station assignment. During this time, one of my colleagues fell ill, and we suspected he could have contracted COVID. Our Team Lead immediately instructed us to go back home lest others catch it. But it was too late; I started feeling feverish, and immediately upon returning home, I took my test. Before the test confirmed that I was COVID positive came the news that my friend had tested positive. So, I knew I had got it, too. Thankfully, I didn't need to be admitted to a hospital. I tested negative 2 weeks after I started medications, but it took me more than a month and a half to recover fully.

During this time, I was in touch with Pratik, and after I recovered, I visited his house. I was not sure how the first date would turn out. So, I used my usual trick; I told him that I had some other work as well, so I would meet him and then carry on. But as we got talking, I felt comfortable with him. We went out, got a beer and chilled together.

Q. *Have you had multiple relationships at the same time? Or cheat on your boyfriend?*

Sumeet: No. I am into serial monogamy. When I am in a relationship, I give it my all; I delete my dating app. Yes, it's true that even when I'm in a relationship, I may still have desires for someone else. I am human, after all, but touch wood, I have always had control not to cross the boundary.

A few years ago, I was in a relationship with another man, and I remember meeting one of my friend's boyfriends. We hit it off instantly and became very fond of each other. On one occasion, I was at his house. I don't remember why. Neither his boyfriend nor mine were around. There was a point where we were tempted to cross the boundary. But both practised restraint, although it was damn difficult. We felt that we would lose respect for each other if we cheated on our boyfriends. I know it sounds very old-fashioned, but that's how it was.

Interviewer's commentary:
We arrived at the restaurant, handed over the car keys to the valet, and then settled down in the designated no-smoking zone. We ordered breakfast and continued.

Q. *Was the relationship you mentioned just now, the first one you've ever had?*

Sumeet: No. My first couple of relationships were with girls. It was during this time, when I was dating a girl and in the 12th standard, that I realised I was also interested in boys. Till then, I would like to watch hunky guys, but I can't say they turned me on. But around this time, I had my first sexual contact with my male bestie and realised I also enjoyed being with men.

Q. *Could you tell me something about your initial*

relationships with girls?

Sumeet: There were a total of three relationships; one didn't last long because it was long distance, and the second was more of a fling than a relationship. The third one lasted for around three years. She was a medical student. But we didn't get along well. We would fight every week over something or the other. She was in a dilemma because her Dad wanted her to marry a doctor; I wasn't one. And then, one day, when I told her that I was Bi-sexual, she was shocked. When she asked, "Isn't there a cure or something?" it was my turn to get shocked. "You are a doctor, for God's sake. How can you say that?" I was furious, and well, you get the gist. Things ended fast.

Q. *Have you lived together in a relationship?*

Sumeet: With men, yes. Not with women. I feel you may know a person well, you may have slept with him/her many times, and you think it will work out, but till he/she moves in with you and you start living together for a couple of years, you don't know whether it will work out or not.

In one of my past relationships, I thought it would work out, but after he moved in with me, our differences began to surface. Maybe he had expectations from me that I couldn't meet that finally led him to leave me. *(After a pause, he continued.)* For example, I am very careless about my clothes and things. He didn't like that. Since he liked to do things around the house, he would wash my clothes in the washing machine, dry them, and so on. He would neatly arrange my stuff. I told him I would wash my clothes and keep my stuff neatly, which, frankly, I am loath to do. Even if my belongings look scattered, I know exactly where I've kept my car keys. If he rearranges stuff and place it somewhere else, I will just lose it. I would tell him just to leave my things as they are, or remind me occasionally to clean up the place. But no… he

couldn't resist cleaning up the house and keeping it spic and span. He enjoyed doing it and would then complain about my being untidy.

In one of my other relationships, my partner would expect me to take him out on a date. I would go out with him when he asked me to, but frankly, I'm lazy. So, I would go out with him, but he would get upset that it was he who had always to take the initiative. That would lead to tiffs, *gade murdo ko ukhadke purani bate leke phirse shuru karna*… ('remember that time when I'…. 'Remember that time when you')… *rona-dhona shuru* (they start crying), 'how I have lost interest in him…'.

Frankly, in such matters, I quickly apologise to get it over with. So that I can have a couple of quiet days. But after a couple of days… again, same old same old *(a smile flickered across his face)*, I was bitching about this with one of my straight friends when he interrupted me saying, "Bro, you don't have a boyfriend, you have a girlfriend… just like me. Everywhere, it's the same. Just learn to put up with it." *(He took a long drag and continued.)* I used to have a misunderstanding that women are high maintenance; dating men would be easier. We are similar in sex and gender, so it would be easier for me to get along with a man. But no, that is not true. Other than some *fuddu* (negligible) differences- like I can do *bakchodi* (Hindi slang term for playful banter, idle chatter) with men, straight or gay, the way I can't with a female. When it comes to relationships, I find there is not much difference, and it's tough dating either.

Q. *So, when differences arise, who is your support system?*

Sumeet: At times, it is my straight friends/colleagues who have been my support system. At the IT Company where I work, I am out to my team, and they are cool about it. They are my age, and although they are straight, they are all accepting of my sexuality. And they, too, bitch about their private lives

and support each other.

However, the biggest support has come from my sister. When she came to know I was Bi, she was cool; she took it in her stride. By the way, I am not out to my parents.

Q. *Do differences arise due to different perceptions about sex? Let me reword this: Do differences in sexual expectations cause stress in relationships?*

Sumeet: Yeah, at times. For example, I remember a job where I used to work 12-14 hours a day. All I wanted to do was come home and sleep, get whatever little sleep I could. One of my ex-boyfriends had a regular eight-hour work shift, so in the evening, when I came home, he would be ready to get it on, and I just didn't have the energy. That used to cause a bit of friction. Eventually, he started suspecting that I was probably getting it elsewhere, and so I was not interested in him. So yes… lifestyle differences between partners can cause problems.

One time, I remember that he was upset that I had masturbated. He was of the opinion that if you have a boyfriend, you don't need to masturbate. I tried to convince him, but to no avail. Finally, when he complained to one of my straight friends, he explained, "I have been married eight years, and I still masturbate. It doesn't mean that I am no longer interested in my wife, but at times I want to do it alone. Pleasuring yourself solo and pleasuring with someone else are two different things. You don't have to draw a negative inference and take it as a rejection."

Q. *Have you faced episodes of domestic violence?*

Sumeet: Not with Pratik, but in one of the previous ones, yes. I don't think it was a healthy relationship. It was abusive.

Q. *So, why did you continue in that relationship?*

Sumeet: The usual. I loved the person and thought that eventually, things would settle down… but that didn't happen. When it ended, it hurt a lot, and it took some time for me to get over it, but finally, I was able to find closure. I lost a great deal of confidence in myself after that relationship. Doubts crept in. Will I be able to make the next relationship work? Will it turn out to be just like the last?

Q. *Didn't both of you consider approaching a counsellor for couple counselling?*

Sumeet: I did suggest to him once, but he was not interested. And I think by that time, things had already reached a stage where it was just a matter of time before we parted ways.

(We were quiet for a while, done with our breakfast.)

Sumeet: Shall we step outside?*Mai sutta leta hu* (I need a smoke.)

Interviewer's commentary:
We stepped outside into the designated smoking area. A couple of women sat at corner tables with their laptops, lost in the world of online calls. We chose a table near the door and ordered iced tea.

Q. *What led to the breakup in your last relationship?*

Sumeet: I come from a background where, in certain ways, my parents are very conservative and in other ways very liberal. For example, they are ok with women studying and working. My sister is well-educated. Dad always insisted that men should work alongside women. So, all of us —my brothers and sisters— have shared household chores with Mom and Dad. But when it comes to relationships, my parents are very

conservative. Dad insists that I marry a woman of my caste. They have been trying to find me a bride. At times, they invite me for matchmaking. So far, if the girl or her parents haven't rejected me, I or my family have kept rejecting the girls.

When I told my boyfriend I had another call from my Dad asking me to come over, that was the last straw for him. He lost his cool. I told him not to take this seriously, but I think he couldn't handle it, a Damocles' sword hanging over him all the time. I can't say I blame him. We had a shouting match, and I left, went on a long drive, and stayed out until evening. When I came back, he was gone.

He went to a friend's place and later called my friend to tell me that he would come on a certain date and time to collect his belongings. I sorted through his belongings and took back a couple of gifts I had given him. Nothing expensive… *ek do fuddu cheezhein* (a couple of items of no value). I made sure I was not at home when he came. And that was it.

Q. *Have you ever communicated again? Met again?*

Sumeet: Nope. That was it. *(For a while, Sumeet was lost in thought. Then he said,) Ek baat batau* (Let me tell you something.) I think straight relationships may be easier. From childhood, girls are trained by their families to adjust and prepare them for marriage. So maybe it's easier to make a straight marriage work. I don't know.

Additionally, societal acceptance makes it less stressful. Gay men find it very difficult to adjust and make compromises that are essential for a long-term relationship. They give up very easily. But that's just my opinion. *(After a pause, he continued.)* Because there is no societal acceptance, we start on the wrong foot. Even before the first step is taken, we are already painting a doomsday scenario. How long will it last? Is this going to work? And as breakups pile up, our confidence

goes downhill.

(Sumeet stubbed out his cigarette and beckoned to the waiter for the bill.)

Q. *So, what next?*

Sumeet: I don't know *yaar* (buddy). Just a couple of months ago, my family selected a girl. She was from IT and was working in a different city. I got along with her very well. We both gave the go-ahead. But then her parents and my Dad had a tiff. The mediator knowingly or unknowingly told some things about the girl's family to my Dad that pissed him off. I tried to set things right, but you know the amount of ego that is involved in such matters. Dad made it clear that there was no way he would agree to this match. And it was not a caste issue either. *(After a pause, he added,)* I got fed up and told my parents, "*Tumhe jo karna hai karo. Tum chuno, mai shaadi karta hu*." (Do what you want to do. You choose the bride, I will marry her.)

(We got up to leave.)

Sumeet: *(I could see the pain on his face as he said,)* So right now, it's all up in the air. I am at a stage where I don't know how things will turn out. Will I marry a girl? Will I settle down with a man? Or continue being single… that's ok too… *jaisa chalta hai chalne do* (let things continue as they are now.)

•••

Anagha & Manisha

Interviewer's commentary:
I followed the Ghostriders. Anagha driving, Manisha riding pillion. Whitescarves wrapped around their faces to ward off the heat and dust. Anagha wore a goggle. Their Activa sped along, twisting and turning and soon came to a small café. We parked our bikes and sat at table numbered 16. Apparently, this was their favourite haunt. We sat at the back of the café, away from the din of the traffic.

As Manisha and I settled down, Anagha went to place our order. Today, Manisha wore no makeup. As if sensing what I had noticed, she said, "The past week has been very hectic. Anagha's elder brother got married two days ago. We are completely exhausted."

"They allow you to sit for as long as you want; I can also bring my laptop and work here," Anagha said as she returned after ordering cold coffee for herself and me and tea for Manisha. Obviously, they were not exhausted enough; I remarked that I could clearly see a fresh two-inch love bite on Manisha's fair neck. Both of them looked at each other and giggled.

I could see the remarkable change in the way they were relaxed in my presence in this instalment of the interview. During our first meeting at their Path Lab, Anagha had been a bit tense, and Manisha spoke very little, stating dismissively, "Compared to Anagha, my life has been pretty dull; I have very little to say." However, during the second interview, they had both become relaxed. While Anagha continued to dominate the conversation, as was her nature, Manisha also opened up, interrupting Anagha when she became too excited about the topic being discussed.

This was our last one-on-one meeting. As I sipped my cold coffee, I noticed a young straight couple on the other side of

the aisle, diametrically opposite to me. They were busy necking, lost to the world around them. I envied them for taking the world for granted. I turned my attention back to these love birds, and the final segment of the interview began.

What follows is their story, as told during these interviews and subsequent phone calls I made to them, to address the gaps in the interview. All names used in this chapter are aliases, as requested by participants.

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Q. *Manisha, could you tell me a bit about your background and how you came into contact with Anagha?*

Manisha: Ummm. Where do I start? My Dad is Punjabi, and my Mom is from Himachal. My Dad is in the military. Ever since I can remember, he has been transferred every two years, and we have moved with him. Chandigarh, Delhi, Vizag, Kerala. Initially, parting with friends was not so painful, but as I grew older, it became more difficult to let go. Also, I was ugly and fat, so I obviously had low self-esteem.

Mom is abusive by nature, hitting and slapping me or my brother for the slightest bit of infraction. Dad was emotionally distant from me and my brother. So, my only support was my elder brother. Each looked after the other.

In school, I enjoyed playing cricket. I remember our coach approached my parents to ask for their consent to let me be on the cricket team. But no… they were adamant- 'Girls don't play. They study.' But I was not very good at studies, unlike my brother, who is brilliant. He is now studying at an IIT.

Like all other girls of my age, I became hooked on social media from… I think 8th standard. It was a great way to meet others. From the 9th standard, I started dating boys. As you

know, they only want sex, and whenever a boy has tried to kiss me, it has felt so gross. They never gently kiss on the lips, their lips lingering on mine… *phatak se* tongue *andar ghusate hai* (they immediately stick their tongue in.) Eeks. But these dates made me realise that I don't feel anything sexual about a boy. It has always been girls who turn me on. I started fantasising about kissing and touching girls. But at that time, I didn't know whether what I was feeling for other girls was ok or not.

One day, I think this was early 2020. While I was watching the web series- *Love, Lust, Confusion*, there was a scene- a lesbian kiss. Watching that, I got butterflies in my stomach. I felt validated and suddenly realised that I was not the only one. That set me off on an online search frenzy- girls kissing girls, and I came across the word LGBT.

It was during my searches for LGBTIQA+ pages that I stumbled across Anagha's comment on a poem from the same web series. Someone had posted the poem, and Anagha had commented on it- 'Where is my missing piece of the puzzle?'. Obviously, she had taken a liking to that poem. It had touched me, too. I 'liked' the post.

I then scrolled through all of Anagha's posts and 'liked' them all. I guess around 300 in all… I sort of digitally stalked her, I guess…*(giggling)* I was so young and immature then.

Anagha: It was this stalking that got on my nerves. I thought that if she wanted to talk to me, she should just go ahead and do so. But instead of waiting for her to message me, curiosity got the better of me, and I sent her a message. 'Do you also like the series?' She replied 'Yes'. And that was the beginning of our friendship.

Manisha: *(Smiling impishly),* …and an immediate breakup of the friendship a couple of months later.

(She looked at Anagha.)

Anagha: *(Responding in a mock-angry tone,)* Go on. You tell him.

Manisha: I had one of my friends call up Anagha and tell her that I have been in a bad accident. Anagha just freaked out. She could not focus on her work, her family, or anything else. She tried to call me, and it was after a dozen or so calls that I finally picked up her call, and she found out about the prank. Furious, Anagha instantly broke her friendship with me. I was so immature.

Q. *Are you still?*

Manisha: No, I have come a long way, but a little bit… yes… also a bit impetuous.

Q. *Anagha, tell me about your background when you met Manisha.*

Anagha: As she mentioned earlier, my story is a bit complicated. I come from a very traditional, conservative background. Dad worked in an ammunitions factory. He was very strict. Everything had to be spic and span. The crease of our clothes should be just so. It was a rule that the family had to dine together in the evening. My Dad would say, "I am out the whole day, we should eat together at least once a day." So, the five of us —my parents, my elder brother, my younger brother, and I— would always have dinner together. Mom was educated, M.Com., LLB. She worked as a Bank Manager for a while, but after my elder brother was born, my Dad asked her to focus on raising him, and she gave up her job. Mom was traditional too, or maybe she became traditional after getting married; I'm not sure.

I studied in an all-girls school. I saw girls experiment sexually in adolescence. I used to see them kissing. The first

time I saw my best friend kissing a girl in a stairwell, I was shocked. But I liked what I saw. Girls took an interest in me because I was a tomboy. They loved my boy haircut, and they would buy me gifts, such as chocolates. I had a classmate who would invite me to her house, and then she would, on purpose, take her top off. But I was such a prude. I would turn away or close my eyes. It was in the 9th standard that I finally mustered the courage to peck a girl on her cheek.

I was very good at studies and enjoyed doing outdoor work. From the beginning, I excelled in Biology, and in the 11th grade, I started working part-time as a Phlebotomist (a laboratory assistant who draws blood at the pathology lab.)

Had I told my parents, they would have forbidden me from working. But I didn't. I used to tell them that the biology practicals last till late in the evening. However, in the 12th standard, I had to leave the job as it was too faraway. After the 12th board exams, I joined an Andrology lab (a specialised facility that focuses on the study and analysis of male reproductive health.)

However, as the workload was heavy and lasted until 10 pm, I was unable to continue. When the boss, who loved my work, requested that my Dad allow me to work and offered to sponsor my studies in Andrology in Mumbai and Bengaluru, my Mom and Dad refused. I then enrolled for my PhD at TISS (Tata Institute of Social Sciences) and started working in Birla Hospital (PCMC, Pune.)

Unexpectedly, my Dad died of a heart attack. There were no signs or symptoms. I was the apple of his eye, and his passing away was a huge shock. I vividly remember that till he was taken to the crematorium, I did not shed a single tear. I was numb, completely shell-shocked. It was seeing him lying in the ambulance and being taken to the crematorium, people talking about 'the body' when referring to my Dad, that the

awful truth sank in.

Suddenly, my Mom, both my brothers, and I were left to fend for ourselves. My older brother was studying for MPSC, and the younger brother was in school and other than the family pension that Mom would draw, I was now the sole earning member of the family.

(She faltered, took a deep breath and went on.) A while later, my marriage was arranged by my relatives. The groom was a distant relative. Coming from a traditional background, there was no question of me choosing my partner or disagreeing with the marriage. I was trained to be obedient.

I got married in mid-2019. It turned out to be a nightmare; I became a slave for my in-laws. From 5 am to 11 pm, I had to do all the chores, go to work, return in the afternoon, serve them lunch, then go back to work, come back again, and complete the remaining chores. They refused to hire a maid. I had to clean and wipe down the 5-bedroom house, wash clothes and utensils, and cook every day. I would do it meekly, as I was trained to do so. But then I found out that they had lied to us that my husband had a job; he didn't have one. Soon, the in-laws started asking for money. And worst of all was my mother-in-law. She was very weird and a control freak.

Q. *Can you give an example?*

Anagha: Oh! I can give you many. For example, on our wedding night, I was asked to sleep on the floor on a blanket in the bedroom, the mother-in-law slept on the bed, and my husband slept with the relatives in the other room. I couldn't sleep the whole night. I wondered what was going on. Soon enough, I realised that the entire family was scared of her. She was a control freak, and no one could predict her moods. Suspecting something amiss, one day, on the pretext of

cleaning the cupboards, I went through each bag and came across a file of medical reports and prescriptions. She had a mental illness and had been on medications for a long time.

When it got too much, I complained to my husband to intervene. But he was a total mommy's boy. He would emotionally blackmail me, but he continued to be scared of his Mom. He would simply ignore the mental and physical harassment and abuse she inflicted on me day and night. My father-in-law, too, never bothered to come to my rescue.

To cut a long story short… I couldn't take it anymore. Every day, on the way to my work, I used to read a banner '*Shambhar diwas sheli houn jagnya peksha ek diwas sinha mhanun jagava'* (Better to be a lion for one day than a sheep for a hundred.) The words would haunt me day and night. Finally, in December 2019, I removed all my ornaments, including my *Mangalsutra* (a sacred necklace worn by married Hindu women, symbolising their marital status and commitment), and kept them in the drawer in the bedroom. I packed my bag and, on the pretext of going to Mumbai for an exam, left the house, never to return.

I filed for divorce. I didn't ask for a single Rupee as maintenance. I just wanted the nightmare to be over so that I could move on with my life. In 2021, we were granted a mutual divorce.

During this period, I was utterly devastated mentally. I would go to the office, come back, and not speak to anyone. I was a zombie. And, on a rebound, perhaps, I don't know, I started dating a girl I met online. But since she didn't want to rebel against her family, we parted ways. That breakup made matters worse. I was in a deep, dark depression. It was around this time, early 2020, that Manisha liked my poem.

Q. *And so, after the friendship breakup?*

Manisha: After the breakup, we eventually patched up, but we would fight over and over again. I couldn't figure out the stress she was undergoing because of the divorce. She couldn't deal with my immaturity and insecurity. When I confided in my brother, he said, "*Tu to hamesha kategi*" (You always take things lying down, so you are bound to lose every time). *(After a pause, she added,)* Oh! I had told him about my friendship with Manisha, and he also knows I like girls. He is ok about it. Anyway, his remark riled me, and I decided to take charge. I told Anagha that I was breaking up with her as I didn't feel anything for her. I lied; she knew I was lying, but it felt good to be in charge for once. Anagha replied that she was willing to wait for me; she would give me time to think about it. I ignored her offer.

Over the next two years, we exchanged messages, but they were brief and terse- 'How are you doing? And 'Doing good' kind of messages. During this time I focused on my studies. After the 12th standard, I had no idea what I was interested in. However, one of my seniors suggested Philosophy, so I enrolled in a degree program in Philosophy at an all-girls college. What fun! So many temptations- girls with red hair, green hair. I tried to meet girls and guys on the *Bumble* dating App. But nothing worked. When Anagha flew to Delhi to meet me, I was dating another girl. But she was even more insecure than I was, constantly seeking attention and validation. It was hell. So, in a way, Anagha saved me.

Anagha: I forgot to tell you that I am very spiritual. I am not religious. I can't believe in a God that I can't see or measure. But I do seek spiritual guidance when I am in pain or depressed. So, unable to bear the longing for Manisha, it had been around three years since she had broken up with me, I went on a pilgrimage to Vrindavan (A place of religious importance to Hindus who believe that Krishna spent most of his childhood in this city.) I consider *Krishna-Radha's* relationship to be sublime and prayed for deliverance. If I

couldn't have her, then at least let me meet her once in person and grant me the strength to get over her.

The next day, I visited the Taj Mahal at Agra and posted my selfie on Instagram, hoping she would see it. She did, but a day too late; by then, I had come back. She messaged me, 'Are you in Delhi?' I was thrilled at getting her response and lied, 'Yes.' She replied, 'Ok, let's meet tomorrow morning for an hour before I rush off to college.' Oops.

Hastily, I booked a ticket and flew a red eye to Delhi. At the airport, I searched for her in the crowd. Finally… finally, I spotted her. I was seeing her personally for the first time. My heart was pounding, but outwardly, I remained calm. Very reserved, formal. As she approached me, I could see that she was bubbling with excitement. She hugged me; she had no indication of the emotional turmoil I was going through.

We decided to check into a nearby hotel. And sat across each other, looking at each other. I tried to speak, but I couldn't get the words out. Breaking out of a reverie, I said, "Let's play a game… Let each of us write a word about what we are feeling at this moment." And the words flowed. We then spoke… and spoke and spoke… what we wanted in life, what we wanted from a relationship… on and on and on…

Manisha: *(interrupting Anagha)* By the end of it, I was sure I wanted to be with Anagha.

Anagha: Well, that's what I thought too, then. At the airport, Manisha couldn't stop crying. As I reached the boarding gate, I texted 'I love you.' And for the first time in our relationship, she texted me back, 'I love you too.' I was in heaven.

So imagine my shock when Manisha dropped a bombshell the very next day, 'I am not sure whether this will work out for us.' From heaven, I was back in hell. With my last ounce of

energy, I wrote back, 'You know you overthink everything and lose everything every time. Maybe for once you should try to think from the heart.'

We couldn't continue with a long-distance relationship, and so the planning began. Over the next three to four months, I visited Delhi a couple of times to meet Manisha. We agreed that Manisha should move to Pune. We also decided that studies in Philosophy had no future.

Manisha: I lied to my parents that I had an internship in Pune. What I did was cancel my admission from Delhi and move to Pune in early 2024.

Q. *Did you bring all your legal documents?*

Manisha: Yes. I brought all my legal documents. *(She paused and then added,)* Recently, I have enrolled for a Bachelors degree in Psychology. That is what interests me now.

Q. *Where did you stay when you came to Pune?*

Manisha: With Anagha's family. I was so nervous. I had no idea how her mother would treat me. I was to stay with them till another arrangement could be made.

Q. *Anagha, during this hiatus, when did you come out to your mother?*

Anagha: During the divorce process, I was depressed and didn't feel like talking to anyone, including my family members. My Mom was witness to my pain, but all she could do was watch helplessly.

After the divorce, things began to improve gradually. My depression lessened; I started communicating with Mom.

Later, as I started my long-distance relationship with Manisha, I started throwing hints to Mom. I took her to see Sonam Kapoor's movie *Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga*. When I told her that I was dating a girl, she said, "It's because of your divorce that you are thinking along these lines. There is no such thing (*as same-sex love*)." But when I told her that I had asked Manisha to come and stay with me, Mom was shocked and upset.

At this point, I put my foot down. "Mom, since Dad's death, I have been the man of the house, ensuring that my brothers got an education. To date, I have followed traditions, done my duty and addressed all that my family wants. And all I got from the traditional, subservient life was a nightmare of a marriage. This time, I want to make my decision independent of what you all want. If I screw this up, it will be on me. I accept complete responsibility for it. But I want to do this my way. If you do not allow me to, I am ready to leave the house for good."

Mom relented, albeit reluctantly. Over the next few months, my Mom noticed the change in me, how happy I had become —a sharp contrast to what I had been for the past few years. She was happy seeing me happy.

Q. *How did your bringing your girl-friend to stay with the family affect your elder brother?*

Anagha: At that time, he had passed his MPSC and was selected for the post of constable. He was out of station most of the time for training. When I told him, he was furious, saying that I was bringing shame to the family. But I stood fast, and when Mom relented, he was unable to take the matter any further.

Q. *Coming back, Manisha, you said you were nervous about coming and staying as a daughter-in-law. How was your experience?*

Manisha: Oh, it was very different from my family. I got along well with Anagha's mother. I made sure to help with the household chores and take care of her. Even when I screwed things up, she was patient, unlike my Mom, who was very abusive. But now that I have settled down, I help her less than before, and she complains, "You have become as lazy as Anagha." *(Manisha laughed and continued.)* The younger brother quickly accepted me as a family member. But he teases me often, and I am losing my patience with him.

Q. *For instance?*

Anagha: *(giggling)* For instance, even when we are at a relative's place or attending a function, he will openly say, "Manisha will not eat till Anagha feeds her… *Anagha tila ghas bharav*" (Anagha, please feed her). It's so embarrassing for both of us, more for Manisha.

Q. *Anagha, don't your relatives object to this relationship?*

Anagha: No. Because they know I am the man of the house. They are aware of what I have done for the family. There was only one acquaintance who commented to Mom, "Why do you allow this?" But Mom was firm in her reply, "Everybody has issues; I know you have your own with your marriage. Let's each of us just mind our own business." And that was it.

Q. *So, are you all currently staying together?*

Anagha: Yes… *(After a pause, she continued.)* Manisha and I are working on shifting to a new place. Although the elder brother is out of station most of the time, with Manisha, my Mom, and my younger brother living in a 1 BHK, it's difficult to get privacy. Hopefully, by the end of the year, we will move to a new place.

Interviewer's commentary:
It turned out to be much earlier. They moved to the new

apartment within a month of the last interview session.

Q. *Currently, both of you run the Path Lab, right?*

Anagha: Yes. We are both partners in the enterprise. We started the lab in late 2022. I took a loan to purchase this property, and I pay EMIs (Equated Monthly Instalment.) Manisha helps me run the lab and also assists in managing a small organic products enterprise that my Mom started. It manufactures dehydrated food products.

Q. *Do you have a joint savings account?*

Anagha: No. We tried to open one at our bank, but since we are not legally related, the bank official was not very cooperative. We didn't pursue the matter any further.

Q. *Medical Insurance?*

Anagha: None of us have medical insurance.

Interviewer's commentary:
Considering the exorbitant costs of medical treatment, I suggest that both of you purchase it at the earliest opportunity.

Q. *Now, let me play the devil's advocate. Manisha, in this current situation, do you feel insecure?*

Manisha: *(threw a quick look at Anagha and lowered her eyes.)* Yes. Sometimes *(she hastily added.)*

Interviewer's commentary:
I paused and glanced at the straight couple in the other booth, cosying in each other's arms, still lost in their world. I sat quietly for a while, sipping my coffee, my brow furrowed, thinking about a couple of worries that came to my mind. Taking a deep breath, I voiced them.

Q. *So, Manisha, what happens if this does not work out? Anagha is well-educated, financially well-settled, and owns the place. What if there's a breakup, and you're asked to leave? What would you do next? You have no support system whatsoever. Have you thought about such a scenario?*

(Anagha looked at Manisha.)

Manisha: *(fumbling for an answer)* Ummm… Ummm, I will try to complete my B.A. Psychology and find a job, I guess?... *(Her face reflected the inadequacy of her answer. Changing the subject, she went on.)* Actually, my first challenge is coming out to my parents. I plan to do that this year.

Q. *Oh. Ok. So, have you planned for it? How do you think your parents will react?*

Manisha: Umm… I don't know. I know they won't accept me; that's for sure.

Interviewer's commentary:
Have both of you, considered the various possible scenarios? Whether they will disown you (Manisha) or come here and forcibly take you away? The reason I am asking is that I have come across many cases where a same-sex couple has been forcibly separated. Parents forcibly take away their daughter or son. We see this happening even in the case of straight inter-caste, inter-religious relationships. The partner approaches the police. More often than not, they side with the parents. At times, they ignore the partner's complaint. At times, they invite the girl and her parents and attempt to convince the girl that it is in her best interest to end the relationship.

Very few partners have the resources to hire an Advocate and approach the Judicial Magistrate First Class to issue a search warrant under Section 100 of the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita, 2023, or approach the High Court under

Article 226 with a Writ of Habeas Corpus. You believe all will be ok if they disown you, but… (I turned to Anagha and continued.)

Q. *Anagha, have you considered how you would handle this? Have you discussed this with an Advocate who could approach the Court on your behalf, if the need arises?*

When the Court issues an Order to produce a person, the police are duty-bound to produce that person in Court. The Court will ask the person about their relationship and what they want. In such a case, without bowing to parental pressure, will Manisha be willing to state that she wants to be with you?

If the Court asks for a bond from you that you are willing to provide for her, will you be willing to give such a bond?

If Manisha makes a U-Turn and gives in to parental pressure, then are you mentally prepared to handle the outcome?

I think both of you need to carefully consider the possible outcomes and plan accordingly before Manisha comes out to her parents.

Anagha: Actually, that's what we wanted to ask you. Can't we get married? Or have a legally sanctioned live-in relationship?

Interviewer's commentary:
It is not illegal for two adult same-sex persons to voluntarily live together as a couple. However, you need to understand that, as of today i.e. August 2025, the term 'live-in relationship' implies a man and a woman living together in a marriage like relationship. Technically, the term does not apply to same-sex couples. As far as same-sex marriage is concerned, as of today, it is not legal in India.

Anagha: What about preparing an Affidavit affirming our commitment to live together?

Interviewer's commentary:
You should do it as soon as possible. It is circumstantial evidence that can be used to establish that this relationship is between two consenting adults who love each other and are living together voluntarily without any coercion. If you want, I can help you draft the Affidavit. Notarise it and have two copies made - each one should retain one copy.

Anagha: Let's get this done. Additionally, we have another plan in the works. I want to have a child through Assisted Reproductive Technology (ART). Working in this field, I know a lot about it. We have both discussed it. Manisha also loves children, and we are looking forward to starting a family. I am 27 now, so with my age, I need to move fast on this.

Interviewer's commentary:
I am sure you know more about ART *than I do, so let me just say that you are well aware of the travails of going through various ART procedures. The distress, mood swings, financial commitment, etc. It's stressful. My worry is, if Manisha's coming out coincides with your ART procedures, will both of you be able to effectively handle two high-stress events concurrently? Will each of you be present to assist and support the other in their crisis? Or will you be too preoccupied with your issues to be of any help to the other? My suggestion is that you both consider the order of these events and plan accordingly.*

Anagha: Yes, we will… There is a lot to chew on… but first things first. Let's get the Affidavit done.

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Rajesh & Sunil

Acronyms Used
HIV: Human Immunodeficiency Virus
AIDS: Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome
ART: Anti Retroviral Therapy
OI: Opportunistic Infections
PLHIV: People Living with HIV
STI: Sexually Transmitted Infection
TND: Target Not Detected

Interviewer's commentary:
As I walked in their flat, Rajesh was just finishing pooja. Girish, one of Rajesh's close friends, came out from the kitchen as I sat down. "Hi, I have come to do some laundry." As an afterthought, he added, "Rajesh has a washing machine", and went back to the kitchen.

Girish is a gay man from a district in Maharashtra, who came out of the closet to his family in 2020, but to date, they have not come to terms with his sexuality. It was a blessing that he was now based in Pune, so dealing with stress from that quarter was a bit more manageable. He worked at an IT company and used his limited spare time to paint.

After the pooja, Rajesh smilingly said, "Let me wake him up (Sunil). He is a lazy bum. Tyacha uravar basun tyala uthavto (I will drag him out of bed.) I told him you were coming at 9 am, but he retorted that 'then Bindu will show up after 9.30 am. Indian Standard Time.' He doesn't know you well", he added apologetically.

Rajesh, in his early thirties, was fair with an eager-to-please demeanour. He had come to Pune a couple of years ago for a job. After staying in a couple of hostels/bachelor pads for a while, he had shifted to this place. Rajesh's brother owned the place. Rajesh currently works at an NGO as an accountant and is preparing for the Chartered Accountant (C.A.) exam.

Eventually, Sunil came out, sleepy-eyed. He was in his mid-twenties with a beard. Having a bearded, macho look was in vogue with the woke crowd. Since it was our first meeting, he was shy, and it took him a while to open up. Sunil had an MBA and worked in a company, but today (14th Jan 2025), being 'Makar Sankranti' (a Hindu festival celebrating the harvest), he had the day off.

After we greeted each other with Til-gul (a particular sweet distributed on that day), as was the custom of the festival, I began with the preliminaries by stating the background of the book, its objectives, and the relevant terms. I added that they are free to use aliases if they are uncomfortable sharing their real name, but I needed an honest account. The names were unimportant. I concluded my spiel by stating that they could take some time to think over and clear up their doubts before we started the first interview.

There was a pause. Rajesh looked at Sunil and then at me. "Can we speak in private for a minute?" I said, "Sure. I will step outside." "No, no. We will go to the bedroom."

They were gone for a few minutes. Girish came out of the kitchen and laid out tea for us. Rajesh and Sunil came from the bedroom and sat down.

Rajesh said, "Till now, we had planned to use our real names and leave out some crucial information, but since we can use aliases, we want to be completely transparent with you. You see, we are both sero-positive (meaning HIV antibodies have been detected in blood, indicating an HIV infection). Very few friends know about it. Girish knows about it, and of course, Vijay."

Vijay had known Rajesh when they were sharing a hostel room. When Rajesh moved to his brother's place, he asked Vijay to move in with him. I have known Vijay (nicknamed 'Kaku' by me, which loosely translates as Aunty) for more

than a decade. He was a cisgendered gay man who had once tried on a sari, and realized that he didn't like cross-dressing, even as fun. But that was enough for me to label him as Kaku. But there was another reason why I called him Kaku. He was an agony aunt for gay men. It helped that he was a counsellor who had worked for an NGO for around seven years. What didn't help was that he had such a strong maternal instinct that none of his dates materialised into a relationship; his maternal instinct wouldn't allow it; in a flash, the Mom in him would take over; the cue was enough for the date to take on the role of poor-little-lost-boy and Kaku was content in figuratively breastfeeding the date.

This is the story of Rajesh and Sunil, recorded in a series of meetings, with some input from Girish and Vijay. All names used in this chapter are aliases, as requested by interviewees.

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Rajesh: In 2017, I started experiencing various stomach ailments. I visited several doctors, but I didn't get any relief. Finally, someone suggested I seek an appointment with a Gastroenterologist in Pune. He advised me to go in for a Colonoscopy and conducted a series of pre-procedure tests. HIV was one of them.

The sero-positive result came as a huge shock. It was completely unexpected. I got seriously depressed. I used to feel very dirty about myself, the stigma, the shame. I remember that, soon after being diagnosed, I was travelling by bus, and one of my friends got on at the next bus stop. He saw me and, coming up to me, extended his hand for a handshake. I didn't want to shake it. I felt so dirty. It was not about any misconception, that he would get infected if I shook his hand. No. It's just that I felt my whole body was a gutter, and I didn't want anyone to touch it.

I didn't know any friends who were sero-positive. I didn't

know any NGO or any PLHIV groups in the city where I was living that I could approach. Moreover, I didn't want to approach anyone for help because of the shame. All I felt was like committing suicide. As I come from a village, I had witnessed instances where villagers had died after being bitten by snakes. I started wishing that if I got bitten by a poisonous snake, I would die and no one would know the truth. But I knew I had to seek help. I got in touch with The Humsafar Trust, an NGO in Mumbai. A counsellor worked with me to alleviate my fears I had about HIV.

I then mustered the courage to approach an acquaintance who worked at a government hospital ART Centre. I told her that I wanted to meet her in person at her home rather than at the hospital. Since she knew me, she agreed. I met her and confided in her about my HIV status, but I kept my sexual identity a secret. She was very helpful and supportive. She counselled me and asked me to come to the hospital to do a confirmatory test and a CD4 test (The CD4 test measures the number of CD4 cells, a type of white blood cells. The blood test is used to check how well the immune system is functioning in people living with HIV.) The CD4 count turned out to be just 190 cells/mm^3 when the normal range for an adult is between 500 and 1,200 cells/mm^3. She put me on Septran for a few days and then with an ART regimen- TLE (Tenofovir, Lamivudine, Efavirenz). Later on, I was moved to another regimen-TLD (Tenofovir, Lamivudine and Dolutegravir).

Q. *Have you experienced side effects from Efavirenz?*

Rajesh: Yes. As you know, one of its side effects can be suicide ideation, and I had been warned of that. And I did keep a close watch on how I felt. However, I diligently took my medications, and my CD4 count improved to 600 and then to 800 cells/mm^3 .

Still, I continued to worry about how long I could survive and

what the quality of my life would be. While waiting in line for ART, if I heard someone coughing, I would panic, wondering whether I would get TB and die.

However, one incident soon changed my perspective. Once, when I was waiting in line for ART medications, the woman in front of me was telling everyone how she had been taking the medications for so many years and how she was healthy and fit. Her confidence and positive outlook completely changed my perspective. I felt more relaxed and confident about facing life.

On a personal level, I began introspecting about my life. Before the diagnosis, I had decided to stay in the closet and get married to a woman. I wanted to have a life like everyone else and make my parents happy. That was not destined to be. I thought about this for a long time and realised that it was a rebirth for me. Why should I, again, in this rebirth, live a fake life? I certainly do not want to marry and risk making my wife sero-positive. Yes, I had the option of seeking a sero-positive woman to marry. The counsellor at the ART centre was eager to provide me with the names of groups or NGOs that worked as matchmakers for PLHIV persons. He didn't know I was gay. But I thought I would rather live an honest life, whatever its limitations, and I came out to him.

Q. *Are you out to your family about your sexuality, PLHIV status, or relationship with Sunil?*

Rajesh: No. I am not out on any of these fronts to my Mom or my elder brother. Dad died a few years ago. My older brother is married and has two daughters. Periodically, they bring up the topic of my marriage, but I have firmly told them I don't want to marry. But they still hope that I will eventually change my mind. Frankly, I don't know whether I will ever come out to my Mom or brother… *(his voice trailed away.)*

In this rebirth, I would rather try in my way to help others who are newly diagnosed with HIV so that they have a support system. And that is why, after I got my confidence back, I opened an Instagram account and started supporting newly HIV-diagnosed gay men. Having conducted extensive research and read extensively on the topic, I believe I am well-equipped to serve as a support system for youngsters. For four years, I have provided support to around twenty young people. Provided them with knowledge, referrals, helped dispel misconceptions, and built their confidence. And it was while doing this that Sunil reached out to me.

Q. *So, Sunil, can you tell me a bit about your background?*

Sunil: I was born and brought up in Mumbai, but my village is in another district. I am currently based here in Pune; my Mom lives in Mumbai. I have a sister who got married recently. My Dad died of COVID in 2020.

(After a pause, he continued.) When I was 21 years old, I was in a relationship with a married man. After some time, he began falling ill frequently. Then I began to fall sick, too; tonsillitis and stomach ailments. In 2022, suspecting the worst, we both decided to undergo the test. Both turned out to be sero-positive. After a few months of the diagnosis, we broke up; maintaining a relationship with a closeted married man is challenging, as you can well imagine. *(Sunil looked at Rajesh and added,)* I have disclosed everything to him; he has disclosed everything to me. There is nothing in our past that we have kept hidden from each other.

Rajesh: Because we care about each other, we both felt that we need to start with a clean slate. Keeping our past hidden from each other would not be good for either of us.

Sunil: After the diagnosis, I desperately needed support and sought support online. That's how I got in touch with Rajesh. I started communicating with him about my doubts, fears,

medications and life in general.

Q. *Sunil, are you out to your family?*

Sunil: Ummm… my sister knows that I am sero-positive. She is a very empowered person. Once she learned of my status, she did her homework. She researched a lot on YouTube and became a very strong support system. When I disclosed my sero-status to my Mom, she was shocked, but she dealt with it much better than most Moms, as she knew an acquaintance who had HIV. He has been taking medications and is doing well. My sister knows I am gay. Recently, my sister told her husband about my sexuality, and he is very accepting, but I have not yet come out to my Mom. I will do so eventually. I am just taking one step at a time.

Q. *So, how did the two of you end up in a relationship?*

Sunil. We continued to be in touch via messages and phone calls for a few months. When I shifted to Pune for my MBA course, we decided to meet.

Rajesh: *(interrupting,)* It was 22nd December.

Sunil: Yes. It wasn't a date, but after we met and started talking, we sort of clicked during our first meeting. Within a week, we met again on 31st December. Just the two of us. We talked for hours and thought maybe we should give this, ummm.., give this a thought.

Rajesh: We consciously didn't use the word relationship or any other tag. Frankly, we didn't know how this would turn out or how long it would last. So, we didn't name it, and today we don't need to.

Q. *Did you consider exploring an open relationship?*

Rajesh: No. We are both very clear that we are not comfortable with having an open relationship. It had to be monogamous or not at all.

Sunil: After around 8-9 months, when our relationship had become reasonably steady, Rajesh asked me about moving in with him. He was eager, but first, he wanted to speak to Vijay about it.

Rajesh: Vijay had been my counsellor and also a great support. Actually, I had initially confided about my sero-status to Girish.

Girish: …but I tend to get emotionally involved with the person, which is not a good thing for counselling purposes. So, after a few initial talks, I thought it best to refer Rajesh to Vijay.

Rajesh: Vijay did not have any experience in counselling PLHIV, but he was a non-judgmental listener and, in those days, when I was struggling with my sero-status, that mattered a lot. Vijay did mention to me that if I needed any further technical assistance, we could approach you, but it didn't come to that. Later, when I moved here, I asked him to move in with me.

There was no question of my asking Vijay to move out, but I was worried about whether Vijay was ok with having Sunil staying with us. However, that was an irrational worry, as Vijay had been a witness to our courtship. On multiple occasions, he had helped me choose the right clothes to wear on my dates with Sunil. So, when I asked him whether Sunil could move in, he was delighted but worried that his presence would not give us enough space and privacy. He need not have worried as we had a separate bedroom.

Sunil: Although Vijay had no issues, initially, I was very insecure because of their close friendship. They would

discuss topics they had been discussing for ages, using relevant references. I didn't understand and laughed at jokes I didn't get. Sensing my insecurity, Vijay would occasionally tease me. It took me a while to catch on to it.

However, over a short period, things have changed. Oh! How things have changed. Now, seeing the way my friendship with Vijay has blossomed, it's Rajesh who, at times, feels envious. Ah! Sweet revenge.

Q. *Rajesh, after you found your love, do you continue your social work of supporting PLHIV youths?*

Rajesh: Of course I do, but frankly, I have toned it down. One issue is I have difficulty in referring them to the right doctors as I have very few contacts, especially those who treat STIs.

Interviewer's commentary:
I promised him that I would provide him with some contacts of LGBTIQ-inclusive medical practitioners in Pune who worked with patients who had STIs/HIV/OIs.

Rajesh: The other issue is that I have had some experiences which frankly irritated me. I am trying to help people deal with their sero-status. Some are HIV positive. Some are diagnosed with STIs. E.g. someone with Syphilis needs a referral to a non-judgemental doctor for getting Penicillin shots. I counsel, support, and get them to the right doctor. Unfortunately, some of them are less interested in their health and more in seeking partners for sex. They start pestering me for sex. I tell them that I am in a monogamous relationship with a boyfriend. And they say, "It's ok. I just want to have sex with you." Despite repeated refusals, they continue to pester me. That has been a big turn-off. You can call me conservative, but I can't deal with this attitude. I accept you as you are, so why can't you accept my framework, my boundaries?

Q. *Did you seek support and guidance from other gay couples in a long-term relationship?*

Rajesh: *(sat silently for a while. Then, with a bit of bitterness in his tone, said,)* Our community doesn't appreciate the struggles we have to face to build, nurture and sustain the relationship. I remember when I announced to one of my gay friends that we were in a relationship, he responded, "Let's see if it lasts for two months." Well, we already had that concern. We know most gay relationships don't last, and you know there are a *hazar* (thousand) reasons for it. The entire society works against us. What we needed at that time was encouragement, support and guidance. Happily, we got that crucial support from our friends Vijay and Girish.

Girish: *(hesitated for a second before adding)*, I also got crucial support from Rajesh and Vijay. I had been in a relationship for three and a half years, but things didn't work out, and the relationship ended on a very bitter note. On the one hand, I was dealing with my family, who were not comfortable about me being gay, and on the other hand, I was dealing with a relationship that was going downhill. Those were stressful days, and during that phase, Vijay and Rajesh helped me cope with the breakup. They made this home available to me 24/7. I could come here and treat it as my second home, share my pain with them, knowing that they cared.

Rajesh: Other than these two, we have a straight friend who has accepted us as gay. But other than these… There are many we are acquainted with, but none I can think of as being close.

After we got serious about the relationship, we lost a lot of gay friends. Some because they felt we no longer had time for them. Which was, in a way, true, as we initially needed to spend a lot of time together. But they didn't understand that. It hurt their ego that we were no longer able to give them the

time they demanded, and they moved away.

Gradually, we drifted away from gay social circles. When we were single, we enjoyed being part of these social circles- the gossip, the talk about sex. But now, after we got into the relationship, we started getting bored with the conversations, which all revolved around who was dating and who had sex. It's as if there is nothing else in this world worth noticing or caring about. So, we no longer attend parties and rarely socialise. When we want to party, it's the four of us here who do it.

Vijay: It helps that Rajesh and I both love to cook. I love to bask in the praise of a well-cooked dish. Who doesn't?

Rajesh: My family runs a restaurant, and so I am at home in the kitchen. *Dosa* and *Meduwada* are my specialities, and whenever my family desired to eat those, they turned to me. The only issue is that I am not a vegetarian, but my family is. So, my mother insists that no non-vegetarian food is cooked in this house. We all respect my Mom's wishes, and whenever we want to cook non-veg, —I am partial to chicken, Sunil to seafood, and Vijay and Girish like everything —we go to Girish's apartment, which is in the adjoining building, and I cook for all of us.

Sunil: At times, Rajesh and I go on vacation. I love trekking to forts. It was my Dad's hobby, and he would take me along… *Kalavantindurg*, *Korigad*, *Kothaligad*, *Bitangad*… But Rajesh does not like trekking. Happily, we both love riding our bikes. Recently, we took a trip to Hampi in the state of Karnataka. I rode from Pune to Kolhapur with Rajesh riding pillion, then Rajesh took over and rode from Kolhapur to Hubli. After that, I took over again and rode until Hampi. On our way back, I rode to Hubli and then Rajesh from Hubli to Pune. But other than these one-off vacations, we have no expensive hobbies or lifestyle.

Girish: Can I add something? On a previous topic? I think it's important to have a support system and friends who are common to both partners. So that if they separately confide in you and you realise there is a misunderstanding, it is easier to help set the record right.

Q. *Speaking of support systems, where do you both stand with your families?*

Sunil: Rajesh has become a part of my family. Every time I go to Mumbai, he tags along. Once at home, he will head for the kitchen, help Mom cook and gossip; they get along well. Last year, when my sister got engaged, Rajesh fully took on the role of planning and executing the wedding. We were travelling to Mumbai all the time to work out the arrangements. My Mom and sister are both witnesses to the efforts he has made to become part of the family. Now, Mom assumes that when I come to Mumbai, Rajesh will be with me. I think it's just a matter of time before I come out to her about my sexuality and our relationship.

Rajesh: Sunil, too, has been to my village a few times. My Mom has stayed here a few times, and they get along well. We are discussing planning a couple of days outing where my family and his family will all come together. Let's see how that works out.

(After a pause, Rajesh continued.) Our families are important to us. Yes, indeed, they may not accept us if/when we come out, but we do not want to break ties with the family. I strongly believe that, barring exceptional cases, it's never a choice between complete acceptance or complete rejection. There is a huge grey spectrum in between, and we should learn to negotiate in that range. That's what I keep telling Girish (*whose family is struggling to accept his sexuality*.)

Q. *You are the first couple I am interviewing who are PLHIV. So, I am curious to know, how does HIV factor in your*

relationship?

Rajesh: Well, we did meet because we are PLHIV. We are on a common journey. Each supports the other. When Sunil had a major throat infection, he had to visit the clinic frequently. He used to be afraid to go alone and felt guilty for asking for my help, as I had to take leave to accompany him to the clinic. But I told him that we are in this together, and we have to learn to work together.

(After a pause he added) Initially, we used to use protection during intercourse, but after a while, when our Viral Load tests showed TND, we no longer use protection. There is a worry at the back of my mind that despite taking the tabs diligently, we may still develop resistance. But frankly, I have not given a thought to it.

Interviewer's commentary:
After the interview, I spoke to Dr. Raman Gangakhedkar (former Director of the National AIDS Research Institute (NARI) and former head of the Epidemiology Department of the Indian Council for Medical Research (ICMR)) for his views on ART.

***Dr. Raman Gangakhedkar**: As long as the couple is taking antiretroviral therapy regularly and their viral load is undetectable, they need not worry about acquiring drug-resistant HIV infection. They should monitor their viral load and CD4 counts in the ART Centre as per the standard six-monthly protocol. Additionally, both partners must be mutually faithful to each other. This ensures that they do not sexually expose themselves to somebody who may be receiving some other ART regimen and has treatment failure. Mutually monogamous relationship also ensures that they do not acquire new sexually transmitted infections.*

Sunil: On health issues, each tracks the other/keeps a tab on the other. Both of us have not missed a single pill (ART)

except once when we couldn't reach home on time and got stuck somewhere.

Rajesh: It helps that I am staying away from my family. I don't have to hide the ART pills and take them when no one is noticing. Right now, our major concern is medical insurance. Neither of us is out as PLHIV at our workplace. These are small institutions and don't provide medical insurance.

Interviewer's commentary:
My understanding is that very few Insurance Companies provide medical insurance to PLHIV. I know one insurance company that provides medical insurance to PLHIV. Still, they have specific criteria for PLHIVs, and their review committee reviews all applications to determine eligibility. I don't know the latest criteria. Let me check and get back to you on that.

Rajesh: Oh. Ok. Thanks. Getting back to the question, I don't think our sero-status is a big deal in our relationship. We face similar issues to those faced by other couples. So we give each other space, respect each other's expectations… and like others, we work hard on our relationship.

Interviewer's commentary:
Just then, Girish came in with breakfast and tea. He had prepared a delicious Upeeth (a popular breakfast made from semolina.) We continued our discussion over breakfast.

Rajesh: Like all couples, we fought a lot initially, and it was very painful for us…

Sunil: For example, I am lazy. I help him when he asks for it. But otherwise, I let him be…

Rajesh: *(got animated.)* That's so irritating. I expect him to take the initiative and assist me. He will stand next to me but not lift a finger. That upsets me no end. Eventually, it builds

up, and one fine day, a seemingly insignificant incident becomes the trigger. I blow up like a volcano. By the time I have vented my anger, I have usually forgotten the incident that initially caused the irritation.

Initially, after these outbursts, we would lie awake the whole night not talking to each other, each aware that the other was awake too… and so we came to an arrangement that no matter what the issue was, we would bring closure to the issue before we go to sleep- it could be a compromise, or you do it your way, I will do it my way, but we make it a point to end the day on a note of peace.

We have to communicate- both the small issues and the big ones. Communicate, communicate…

(After a pause, he continued.)

Some of our gay acquaintances do feel jealous. Everyone wants to be in a long-term relationship, and we all start with a list of expectations from our partners- I want him to be like this… and … and …. Blah blah but we don't ask ourselves what is it that we are willing to give up for the relationship, compromise for the relationship. If we want everything and aren't willing to give up anything, I doubt whether it *(the relationship)* will work.

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Suresh & Vinod

Interviewer's commentary:
As I chatted with Suresh and Vinod at Suresh's favourite Irani restaurant near Karve Road, I suddenly realised that Suresh had changed in some ways since I first met him more than 15 years ago. He, who would never be seen without a cigarette in one hand and a cigarette pack in the other, had given up smoking for over 3 years. Despite undergoing multiple surgeries over the past year, he looked fresh. Still, a thought ran through my mind that it would do him a great deal of good to lose about 10 kg.

Mentally, he seemed well, too. In the old days, I would often see him in a sullen, grouchy mood. Today, he seemed to be in a remarkably good mood, excited to talk about his relationship with Vinod. During our discussion, he told me that post-surgery, he gave up worrying about each and every little thing and that significantly helped him reduce stress and shed a lot of his anxieties.

In 2013, he wrote about himself and his sexuality in the book Antaranga (Experience sharing by Gays and Lesbians), which I had edited. At that time, he had not come out to his family, nor had he been in any relationship.

Today, eleven years later, roly-poly & bald, Suresh sat wearing a t-shirt (a break from the kurtas imprinted with various religious symbols), his bulging paunch pressed against the table. As usual, he was wearing a 'kada' (a bracelet worn by men) on his right wrist. Running his right hand over his thick moustache, he was eager to start.

On the other hand, Vinod was an enigma to me, as I had met him only about half a dozen times at various LGBTIQ events that my organization (Bindu Queer Rights Foundation) had hosted. I vividly remember them wearing matching uniforms

for Pune's 11th Annual LGBTIQ Pride March in 2023. So, other than a few pleasantries, I hadn't had a chance to talk to Vinod. He was shorter, darker and had short hair. He was garrulous and spoke in a soft, deferential voice; I could never imagine him ever raising his voice at anyone.

Both were eager to speak, but Suresh took a backseat, giving space for Vinod to open up about the relationship.

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Vinod: Our first contact was through Grindr (GR). For someone like me, who was not very out and had hardly met anyone who was out, Suresh came across as a refreshing change. His GR profile had links to Facebook (FB) and Instagram. I checked these and was pleasantly shocked, as GR usually has people who don't use their pictures, let alone provide other personal details or handles to their genuine social media accounts. So, I added him to my 'Good List'.

The first meeting was more of a patient meeting a doctor than a date. Suresh had a fissure and piles surgery. Not once, but thrice, and as a Physiotherapist, I spent most of my time reading his files and asking about medical details when we met (he had invited me to his house.) Suresh was so physically and emotionally drained by the hospitalisations, treatment and the frequent visits to the hospital for dressings that sex was the last thing on our minds. Although we were very attracted to each other, we began as friends, not lovers.

Soon, he invited me to organise his hundred-odd collection of books, and we spent most of the day going through them, sorting the books. During my first visit, I noticed that he was a Brahmin, and I was pleasantly surprised to see books on Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, Dalit women's autobiographies, and gender studies, among others. During our long talks, I told him that I was a neo-Buddhist and soon realised that caste or religion would not be an issue either as a friend or as a partner

if we did get into a relationship. I soon came to know that most of his friends were non-Brahmins.

However, my first impression of him was soon challenged. I came to know that he was an astrologer. On one of my visits, I found a mother and her daughter consulting him about the daughter's *Patrika* (horoscope). They fell at his feet as a mark of reverence. It struck me as odd that someone as liberal as he was, at the same time, also conservative.

During a taxi ride with a Buddhist driver, Suresh greeted him with *Jai Bhim*. I thought this was all pretence. Seeing these two conflicting personalities in him, I thought that he was a fraud. And yet, I continued to be friends with him…

Suresh: … Till one day when on a drive to drop him off to his room, we stopped my car at Kasarwadi and just talked… one thing led to another, and I don't know how it happened, all my frustration, my emotional exhaustion about my health issues and loneliness welled up, and I started crying.

The crying evolved into the bawling of a baby and continued for an interminable time. Eventually, as my crying subsided, I turned again to my pet theme, 'I am tired of searching for a soul mate. I just want a commitment from someone. I can't go on like this.' My health issues, along with the fact that I had just got out of a relationship, added to my blues.

Then, it was his turn to open up about how his family mistreated him and the way closeted male friends dealt with him. They would call him for sex when their wives were not around, and after they were satiated, they would become strangers. The rejection from family and his use for sexual gratification without emotional attachment by closeted friends had taken its toll on him.

As both of us cried and hugged each other, we thought it was worth giving it a try to be together. I was deathly afraid to give

it a tag- 'couple', 'relationship'. The use of these words felt almost like a jinx. We decided to spend as much time together as possible and maintain a close, emotionally connected relationship. Sex came a distant second; I was just recovering from my surgery. And so, it began.

As I am into gardening and have a terrace garden, we have developed a habit of being on the lookout for a variety of saplings. We often uproot them from the walls and compounds of various bungalow societies and plant them in our rooftop garden. When we started courting, I had around 150 potted plants, and now the collection has grown to more than 250 plants of various varieties, including materials for bonsai.

Interestingly, without any sort of commitment, one of the first things we did was uninstall GR and other dating apps like Tinder, and Planet Romeo (PR). And it wasn't something we had planned on doing together, either. Each of us, on our own, had independently come to the same conclusion: since we were going to give this relationship a serious try, why did we want to be on a dating app?

(With a twinkle in his eyes, Suresh continued.) Yes, it's true that once in a blue moon, we install a dating app just to play a prank on someone for the fun of it. *(Then getting serious, he added,)* but although the dating app was gone, the insecurity about the relationship persisted. Like most new couples, checking each other's mobiles for dating messages, etc., went on for a long time. Each insisted the other to 'unfriend' or 'block' someone or the other, especially if that someone was an 'ex-boyfriend' or a one-night stand. Now we are past that stage… mostly *(he added with a laugh.)*

It was a while before we went to bed together. Initially, I fretted as to how long the post-surgery recovery would take. But it happened sooner than I had thought, and we soon made up for lost time.

Vinod: As we started spending time together, I realised that he is not a fraud. It's just that he can play these contradictory roles without feeling uneasy. I don't know how he does it. He can comfortably navigate in both settings, a traditional one and a liberal one, which works beyond the boundaries of caste, religion, sexuality, and gender. Even today, I see the contrasts, and I find it amusing that he manages to balance them. So, that no longer remained my concern. Slowly, I started realising that we had more in common than I had noticed.

For one, despite Suresh's profession, he is an atheist, like me. But we do love visiting temples. I love visiting Alandi, Dehu, the *karmabhumi* (place of work) of saints like Sant Dnyaneshwar Maharaj and Sant Tukaram Maharaj. Visiting the ancient temples and reading their *literature is* my way of peeking into the past to understand the injustices they faced at the hands of an orthodox society. Suresh loves to spend hours browsing through bookstalls near the temples, where spiritual books are sold, hoping to stumble upon a rare gem. Over the past couple of years, we have visited many religious sites, including Buddhist caves, Viharas, Mandhardevi, and Shiva temples in the remote areas of Pune and Nashik. My favourites are those which are situated atop a hill.

Both of us are against religious fundamentalism, which means that we do not vote for any political party which uses religious ideology to seek power. So, while we are unsure of which party each of us will support during elections, we are sure of one thing- we know the political parties we will not vote for.

Suresh: I think the major difference between us lies in the kitchen. Vinod is a vegetarian, albeit very lenient in his interpretation. He doesn't eat chicken or mutton but doesn't mind eating eggs and fish; he also likes chicken liver. And he calls himself a vegetarian *(Suresh rolled his eyes.*) On the other hand, as a modern Brahmin, I enjoy cooking and eating

a variety of chicken and mutton dishes. The other difference is that I am very direct in expressing my opinions and taking a stand. Vinod is loath to confront anyone, and at times that pisses me off.

Also, I am less possessive, and I don't mind Vinod spending time with his straight or queer friends, whereas Vinod keeps track of my whereabouts. I don't know whether this has to do with his insecurity, but we are still negotiating this difference.

Hmmm… one more difference I can think of is I am more of a planner and am more disciplined about time. Vinod is just the opposite. He is pretty lazy and follows the Indian Standard Time (behind schedule).

Vinod: Suresh is very punctual but at times, he gets into one of his quirky moods and just cancels something, which upsets me greatly. On the other hand, once I undertake a task, I always complete it, though, as Suresh said, as per my Indian Standard Time (*giggles*.)

Interviewer's commentary:
For a moment, there was silence as the food was served, and we immersed ourselves in enjoying the delicious meal. Once our initial hunger was satisfied, Vinod glanced up.

Vinod: As our relationship blossomed, two interesting things happened. During my first year in college (I was studying for a degree in Physiotherapy), a girl from another college fell in love with me. She had proposed that we marry. Even when I told her I was gay, she continued to be adamant, saying that sex is not everything, and after the forties, it's the companionship that matters more. She finally lost hope when I got together with Suresh. I hope she finds a good, straight boyfriend.

The second thing, surprisingly, was that I lost most of my friends. One of my friends, who was also my roommate, was

ok with my sexuality, but when I came out to his brother, the brother insisted that I move out. My friend did not stand up for me. In another instance, a close female friend who had recently become a mother and knew I was in a relationship with Suresh invited me to her child's first birthday, adding that I was to come alone. I didn't go, and that was the end of another friendship.

All in all, I think Suresh's parents have been more supportive of our relationship than most of my friends. Which is a surprise to me as they are very conservative.

Suresh: Yes, their journey is an interesting story. Unlike Vinod, my coming out to my friends was done without my consent by a 'friend' of mine. As the word spread, many friends abandoned me. Those few who remained continued to be a very strong support. That was not surprising, as many were associated with various class struggle movements.

Sometime later, my coming out to my parents happened unexpectedly. One day, my *aatya* (paternal aunt) visited us as my mother was unwell. The conversation eventually veered around to the need to have a woman in the house to take care of the family. *Aatya* kept going on and on about it, and I snapped, saying "I am not going to marry any woman, as I am not attracted to them." A pin-drop silence reigned; my 'disability' was too shocking for my conservative family to discuss, and that was the end of their plans for my marriage. It was not long before *aatya* ensured that our relatives were 'informed of developments', and since then, no relative has brought up the topic.

Perhaps the more serious problem for my parents was my bringing a boyfriend home. They could barely deal with the fact that I did not desire women. I desired men, but to see the man I desired being with me in the house, staying overnight in my bedroom, was too much for them. I must add that I live on the ground floor of our bungalow, while my parents reside on

the first floor. The entrances, too, are separate, so we have complete privacy. But the idea that my son is with another man in a sexual relationship is something that did not sit well with them.

I ended up moving out of the house for a while when I was dating someone. Eventually, they relented and allowed us back home.

Sadly, after a few years, my partner of that time and I realised that the relationship was going nowhere. Finally, on a long drive in his car, he brought up the topic that had been going through our minds. We mutually agreed to call it a day. We continue to be friends.

So, after Vinod and I started going steady, one day, when Vinod left, my Mom asked me, "Is this the new guy in your life?" Upset, I testily responded, "Do you want me to die alone?" My reply was harsh, but I needed a companion, and I simply could not be single and lonely for the rest of my life, even if my parents desired it. Period.

Fortunately, over the next year or so, things took a turn for the better. As they saw more and more of Vinod, they felt he was the right partner for me. They saw that he was there with me during my treatment, and taking care of me.

Dad, without confiding in me, met him privately before my (one more) surgery and asked him whether it was the proper treatment. A big marker of his trust was when he started trusting Vinod with financial transactions. During my hospitalisation, he gave Vinod a large amount of cash and asked him to take care of the hospital expenses. This was a big thing as, to date, they don't trust me with finances.

And then there were small things that were evident in their change of mind. Once, a pressure cooker exploded in the house, damaging the cooker and the stove (luckily, Mom was

not injured.) Mom took me aside and said, "Why don't you two go shopping for a new pressure cooker and stove since you two will be looking after the kitchen eventually?"

Another such instance was when Mom praised him. She said, "You draw good *rangoli* (A popular Indian art form in which a pattern is made on the floor, at the entrance of the house, usually with coloured sand.) Since you come to stay every weekend, I want you to draw it every week." Seeing Vinod drawing the *rangoli*, my *aatya* said to my Mom in front of Vinod, "Wow, he is drawing such a nice *rangoli*. Who needs a daughter-in-law?"

Eventually, Vinod and I discussed financial matters, and he started contributing to the household expenses every month. Currently, we don't have a joint account for common expenses. He contributes his share to my savings account. I think having a joint account for common expenses is a worthwhile consideration.

(After a pause, he continued.)

But not all my relatives are okay with our relationship. My sister can't stand my sexuality or my relationship with Vinod. Every time she calls, she denounces my sexuality and my relationship. But since my Mom and Dad are sort of okay with our relationship, I don't give a damn about her opinion. This morning, she called me and again gave me a piece of her mind. Fed up, I told her that I didn't want her to call me again ever. Considering my traditional family background, I should be visiting her for *Bhaubeej* (A Hindu festival celebrating the bond between brother and sister), giving her Diwali gifts, etc., but nope. I simply refuse to go through these rituals as she is unwilling to accept me and Vinod.

While her opposition does irritate me, I seek solace in the transformation of my parents. The biggest change has been that my parents, who were shocked about my sexuality, are

now fully understanding of the fact that their son needs to have a man in his life. While sexual intimacy is very important, companionship is equally important and having Vinod in my life is crucial for my well-being. For them to have traversed the arc from being a conservative, traditional Brahmin family to realising that having Vinod in my life is a good thing has been an amazing journey, albeit painful at times. Still, despite the differences that I will continue to have with them, I can't thank them enough for that.

So, they are an important part of our support system, along with my friend circle. I remember the last time we quarrelled; my Mom found out about it. I don't know how. Perhaps it was us yelling at each other. Anyways, she came downstairs, took me aside and asked me, "Have you been quarrelling?" I replied tersely, "A bit, but we will handle it." She replied, "Why don't you go out for a long walk and cool down a bit?" … And it worked.

Not that we have such slanging matches every day. And even when we have heated arguments, they do not generally last more than a day or two, during which we don't talk to each other or text each other. Sometimes, just keeping some distance until our tempers cool down works for us. Generally, within a day or so, one of us will pick up the phone and send a text or make a call, or Vinod will just come to the house and prepare some food for both of us… and that's it.

However, each of us has a distinct personality, and they are bound to clash from time to time. For instance, just a month ago, this Diwali, Vinod insisted that he wanted to wear a *dhotar* (a traditional garment worn in Maharashtra, consisting of a long-unstitched piece of cloth wrapped around the waist and legs with one end passed between the legs and tucked in at the back.) I told him he could wear other clothes, but no. He sometimes shows his stubborn streak. We went shopping, but we didn't find one to his liking. Finally, I had an idea; I picked a brand new *dhotar* from my father's

collection. My Dad gave him a brand new *uparna* (a cloth worn over the shoulders as an accessory) to go with the *dhotar*. But that was not enough; Vinod now wanted a matching *kurta*. And so, we went shopping again. By then, you can imagine how pissed off I was.

At times, of course, the arguments are about some differences which cannot be resolved, but we know that we have to patch up and either resolve our differences or live together with them. None of us can bear the thought of parting because of our arguments.

Vinod: As they *(Suresh' parents)* have been so supportive to us, I, too, seem to have provided some relief to them. Suresh tends to be very unaccommodating in most matters, which often gives rise to conflict. I, by nature, try to accommodate the wishes of both our parents.

So, my being part of his family has helped iron out the creases a bit. Suresh's father recently told me, "You have a soothing influence on Suresh." Suresh's father is a bit introverted; he doesn't communicate much, but he has often taken the initiative in talking to me -whether it be politics or cricket. While he may still have an ambivalent stand on a male being his son's partner, he seems to have found a middle ground of accommodating me…

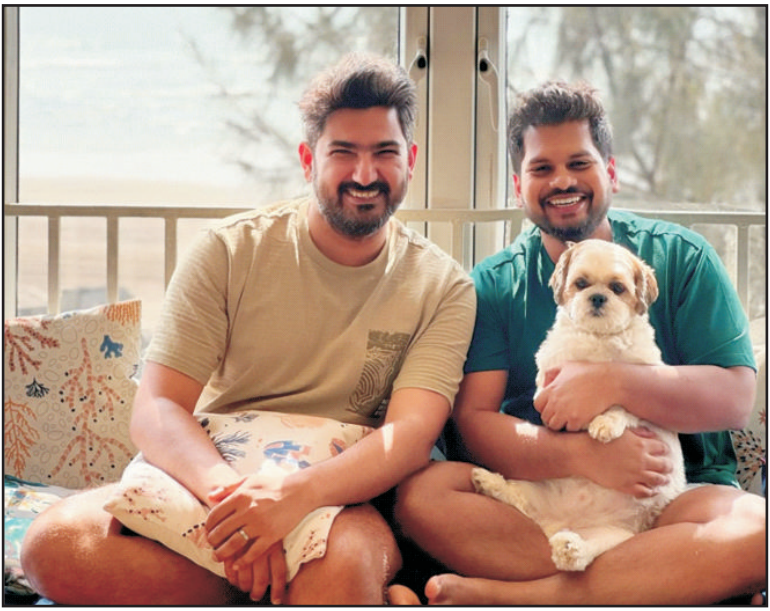
Suresh: …to the extent that when a stranger asks him "Who is that person who often stays in your house?", Dad says "Oh! Vinod. He is just like family."

Vinod: Similarly, whenever Suresh's Mom wants to go on a pilgrimage, she insists that I accompany them. One reason is that she considers me a part of the family; another is that I have become a bridge and buffer between Suresh and his parents.

Suresh: But other than differences in our personalities, other

Vinod and Suresh

Vinod and Suresh



Himanshu, Subh and Poko

Himanshu and Subh

Himanshu and Subh's apartment- Poko in the living room

Nitin and Thomas getting married in New York

Nitin's father, mother, Nitin and Thomas

Thomas, his father and mother

challenges do remain, small and large. And speaking of challenges… we come to our current crisis… Vinod's family.

Vinod: I have known that I was gay since the 11th standard, but it took time to come to terms with it; the internet came to my rescue, where I could read and see material on gay issues. Once, during my college days, my sister and my brother checked my mobile and saw gay porn links, but for some reason, they did not report it to Mom or Dad.

I came out to my Mom when my parents started looking for a bride for me. Mom said that she was okay with my being gay as long as I got married to a woman. She gave me an example of one of our distant relatives. Everyone knows that he is gay. He is married and has children. He is also an *Aradhi* (*Aradhis* are devotees of the Hindu goddess Tulja Bhavani; they follow certain customs and rituals of the *Aradhi* community.) She also added that they could try to find me a woman from an impoverished background who would have fewer demands. I kept refusing, and that became our first point of contention.

We had another clash when I started dating Suresh. My parents wanted me to either marry a woman or stay single and in the closet. They didn't want me to be out as a gay man in public, nor did they want me to settle down with a man. I have participated in the LGBTIQ events in Pune and Nashik, including the Annual LGBTIQ Pride Walks, with Suresh. My family —my Mom, dad, and younger brother —were all furious when they saw my pictures with Suresh at the 2023 Nashik LGBTIQ Pride Walk on Instagram.

The third point of conflict arose when I started seeking financial independence. I was earning well, and for the past few years, I contributed significantly to the household. But when I started dating Suresh, I decided to contribute less to my family. So, they started pressuring me to leave Suresh and return to Mumbai.

As if all this were not enough, Mom is anti-Brahmin. Time and again, she has castigated me for dating a Brahmin.

Things came to a head when my family and their relatives took a taxi to come to Pune and tried to file a police complaint against me. To pressurise me, they threatened to have Suresh arrested under the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989. Suresh and I went to the Police Station. When the police found out that both were adults and in a relationship of our own free will, they refused to entertain the complaint.

Suresh: I contacted you (*Bindumadhav*) and sought your advice and reference to an Advocate. However, on the same day, in the evening, his family arrived at his room and insisted that he accompany them to Mumbai. He lost his resolve, panicked, called his workplace and told them that he had a family emergency, got into the taxi and went back to Mumbai with them.

Vinod: I stayed in Mumbai for a few days, but finally they had to allow me to come to Pune and resume work. I called you *(Bindumadhav)* again and you reprimanded me for not settling the issue once and for all.

Soon afterwards, my Dad again came to Pune. I called you (*Bindumadhav*) again. You bluntly told me to dial '112' (Police emergency helpline number) and call the police to remove my father from my room. I mustered the courage and told my Dad that I would do so if he didn't leave within the next 10 minutes, which he did unwillingly.

However, this issue remains unresolved. We are in consultation with an Advocate that you (*Bindumadhav*) have referred us to, and it's going to take some time before this issue gets settled once and for all.

Another challenge is about our health. While both of us have

found strong emotional and psychological support in each other, our physical health continues to be of primary concern. First of all, Suresh needs to lose weight. I am happy to see progress and am also happy that in the past three years, he has gone from smoking two packets a day to quitting it completely.

Suresh: Until I fell ill, I never gave a serious thought to having medical insurance. By the way, neither does he have one.

The other thing is that none of us have made a will. We have been together for only about two and a half years, so, frankly, none of us have given it a serious thought. However, considering that we have relatives who are unhappy with our relationship, I sense that we will eventually need to make our wills and register them.

Currently, Vinod lives in a rented apartment and visits my house on weekends. We have started doing some groundwork on buying a 1 BHK. However, until Vinod fully resolves the issues with his family, I don't think we can move forward.

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Subh & Himanshu

Interviewer's commentary:
As I rang the doorbell and waited for the door to open, I saw on the left side wall a panel with the names Subh and Himanshu, with the face of a small dog in between, above the dog's head, the words Poko. When Subh opened the door, the first one to greet me was Poko himself, a small dog with floppy ears, wagging his tail furiously, his upturned face looking at me with soulful eyes. It turned out that he was of Tibetan breed.

As Subh ushered me into the living room, Poko followed me, sniffing my ankles. The room was spic and span, painted in cream colour. One corner of the wall was painted white, with a 10-foot by 10-foot painting. The painting was in black, a tree with many branches. There were outlines of photo frames with outlines of family members in them. There was a swing on one branch, with one man sitting in the swing and another beside it. At the base of the trunk, three wooden boards carried the years 2018, 2021, and 2023.

As I sat on the couch, Himanshu walked in, saw me observing the painting, greeted me and said, "These three are the major milestones. We met in 2018; we started dating in 2021, and the same year we got Poko. In 2023, we officially got engaged, moved to Pune, and started living together."

By then, Poko rushed to a corner and, clutching a yellow rubber duck, came to me. As I looked askance at Subh, he said, "He wants you to try to grab it, pull the toy from his jaws and throw it far away. He will run, catch it, and you have to play the game over and over again." So, for a few minutes, I played the game with Poko. But soon, I got tired, and Himanshu said, "You can stop. He can go on the whole day." I gave up; I was no match for the three-year-old Poko.

As we settled down for the interview, Subh grumbled, "I was planning to cook lunch for you. Even our maid knows you were coming today to interview us. She knows that we are a gay couple. She left just before you came. Before leaving, she said, 'Tomorrow, I want to know all about the interview.'"

Before I could say anything, he continued, "I am a very social person, and I love cooking. In Bengaluru, I would have dozens of friends every weekend in my house." I apologised for my inability to stay for lunch and promised that I would have lunch on the next visit.

What follows is their story shared by them over two meetings, the second one followed by a delicious lunch cooked by Subh. As I started the interview, I realised that Subh didn't need any prompting at all. He was very talkative. Himanshu was more reserved in the first interview, but in the second interview, he, too, opened up and warmly shared his experiences.

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Q. *So, neither of you is from Pune, right?*

Subh: I am from West Bengal, and Himanshu is from Uttarakhand. We met through a dating app. But let me start from the beginning. I come from a nuclear family- my parents, my two elder sisters, and I. Dad is an engineer and runs his own company. Mom assists Dad in his company; she is very practical and focused on financial matters, and I inherited her genes in that aspect. Whereas Dad is more romantic by nature.

Himanshu: My family lives in Uttarakhand. Dad works in a government firm; Mom is a homemaker. My younger brother is married, and lives with my parents.

From childhood, I loved to be with my Mom in the kitchen, and it was my younger brother who would do all the outside

work- 'man's' work. In school, I was always the top student in the class, but I would often get into trouble. (*laughing*) I was punished innumerable times by teachers- *murga ban* (a semi-squatting posture as a punishment). But, in the 8th standard, when I came of age, I suddenly became very, very shy, an introvert. One of the teachers who taught me in school and is still in touch with me says, "We don't know what happened to you then. You changed suddenly and became a different person." It was around this time that I began to be attracted to senior boys, specifically twelfth-grade students, and my social studies teacher in particular.

As I was a topper throughout, my family had great expectations from me, and after my 12th, I got admission to an engineering college in Roorkee.

Q. *Subh?*

Subh: In school days, I was a bit feminine, but I don't remember anyone teasing me about it. That happened later. In the 8th standard, I became attracted to a senior from the 11th standard. He, too, was attracted to me. We would hang out, kiss, and do a bit of foreplay. I didn't know the word gay then. But after his 12th standard, he decided to pursue engineering, and then things changed. The next time he met me, he said, "Our attraction for each other was wrong." And it was over. I was so hurt.

To cut a long story short, after school, I moved to Bengaluru in 2006 to pursue a degree in Biotechnology. To be honest, I craved an opportunity to get out of the small town and moving to Bengaluru was a godsend.

Well, not quite. As I started attending college, the teasing and bullying started. Most of the students from the college were from North India and West Bengal. They would chant, "*Dekho chakka aaya, chakka chala.*" *(*The eunuch is coming;

the eunuch is passing by.) I became an introvert, started avoiding these guys and stayed within my close circle of friends.

There was a Mauritian guy in college. He was openly gay and asked me outright, "Are you gay?" I panicked. "No. No. I am not gay." But he was very non-judgmental and became my bestie. Frankly, at that time, I didn't know much about what the word gay meant exactly. When it was time for him to leave India, I cried the whole day. But I am getting ahead of myself.

I got myself a girlfriend. She liked me, and we got into a relationship. It felt good because people started looking at me differently. The bullying lessened, and my self-esteem went up. One day, I went to her house, and we started foreplay, and I realised that I was feeling nothing at all. Nothing compared to what I experienced with the boy in the 11th standard. I told her the truth. She didn't say anything, but we slowly drifted apart.

I narrated this incident to my Mauritian friend. He took me to an internet café and showed me a dating app website. And I came to know that many felt like me- guys interested only in other guys. And in a flash, it dawned on me- why was I expecting something from a woman when I was supposed to expect it from a man? From that point on, I became carefree. I started to say in college that I was gay openly. I no longer cared about the bullying because I had found myself and was happy and content from within.

I started socialising a lot; made a lot of gay friends; dated a lot. But somehow, I always longed for a long-term relationship- I wanted a husband. I don't know why, but for me, these two things —becoming financially independent and having a husband —are very strong driving factors.

Q. *Himanshu, when did you come out?*

Himanshu: Oh! That happened much, much later. Subh has a lot to do with that. I will tell you about it later.

In 2012, I enrolled in an engineering college in Roorkee for a Bachelor of Technology degree. In my second year, I read news about gay activism in the *Times of India*. The news article stirred up the feelings that had been suppressed within me. I started browsing the internet about gay meetings in India. After some searching, I came across a dating app website and started dating guys. But because of my very shy nature, I was afraid to have sex with them. Finally, I met someone who was a fashion designer, and we went steady for about two years. Almost every weekend, I would go to Delhi to be with him.

In 2015, I enrolled in the MTech program for my master's degree at Roorkee. With a very tough schedule and my project work, it became difficult to meet him every weekend. Naturally, he got upset that I was not giving him enough time. We ended up fighting all the time. Every call we had would end in a quarrel. Finally, we broke up. To be fair to him, he did try to patch things up, but I started ghosting him.

In 2017, after completing my master's degree, I applied for a PhD program in Hyderabad to conduct research in Biomechanics. Soon after I shifted to Hyderabad, I met Subh on a dating app in 2018.

Subh: Interestingly, coming out was a different experience for me than most. Except for my Mom, all my family members accepted my sexuality without a fuss. It was my Mom who had a tough time accepting me. But I was as stubborn as her and was unyielding. I told her we could visit a psychologist. But sadly, she disagreed. I never got the chance to have professional help for her to understand my sexuality. Eventually, I told her: "I can't force you to understand or accept me. It's your call."

Q. *Subh, could you tell me a bit about your search for a long-term partner in Bengaluru?*

Subh: *(laughing)* Since I always wanted a long-term relationship, whenever I found someone who had potential, I would date him. But over a couple of weeks, I would realise he was not my prince charming. I would continue to be friends with him, and the search would start all over again. This continued till I met a Tamilian. I was then 19; he was 21. Initially, it was a long-distance relationship, but later he moved to Bengaluru. We were in a relationship for ten years.

When I announced to my mother that I had a husband, she freaked out. She assumed that if he was my husband, I must be transitioning- I must be a transwoman. She had heard about the famous director, Rituparno Ghosh. On the contrary, when Dad visited Bengaluru, I took him to a Chinese restaurant, as he loves Chinese food, and I told him that I had a partner, he was cool. A couple of days later, he took my boyfriend and me out for brunch.

But later, my boyfriend got posted abroad. He would come to India very infrequently. It became very difficult for us to continue our relationship. The breakup after a ten-year relationship was very painful. After I recovered from the breakup, I became more extroverted and started exploring my social life more actively. My search for a partner continued. Finally, after a couple of breakups, Himanshu came into my life courtesy of a dating app.

Himanshu: I saw his pics and liked what I saw. He was slightly older than me. Currently, I am 33, and he is 36. He was also shorter than me. Both of these- height and age are a turn-on for me. My previous boyfriend had similar characteristics…

Subh: *(interrupted, laughing,)* For me, a tall partner who is highly educated is a turn-on.

Himanshu: But right from our first call, which happened in 2018, Subh made it clear that he was in search of a long-term partner. Or we could be friends. We interacted on and off. I created a new Instagram account; the name was a combination of his and my name, and *(laughing impishly at this point)* I started stalking him. He was clueless about me stalking him. Initially, it was very difficult to connect with Subh at an emotional level because he came across as very rude, aggressive, assertive and brutally honest.

Subh: I made it amply clear from the beginning that I wanted my partner to be out to his parents. Most of the problems in a gay relationship arise because guys don't come out of the closet, and when they do, their families create a lot of problems in the relationship.

Himanshu: That was a major issue as I wasn't out then. During this time, I think it was just after the COVID pandemic that Mom started searching for a bride for me. As the elder son, she had high expectations of me- '*ghar mein badi bahu ayegi'* (We will soon have a daughter-in-law) and so on. She selected one, and I met her. But I had no feelings for the girl. She would text me all the time, and I would wonder if I wanted to be with this person for the rest of my life. A person I have no feelings for? I was in a dilemma. So, when my Mom visited my *mama* (mother's brother) in Bengaluru, I went to meet him and then met Subh.

Subh: At that time, I was completely oblivious to the fact that he had fallen in love with me and hence wanted to meet me. I assumed that he was just another friend visiting me because he was in town. During the visit, he didn't disclose to me that he was on the verge of being engaged to a girl. As usual, I started giving him advice on the importance of self-acceptance and, more importantly, coming out to our parents. We owe it to them. I have also given this advice to my other friends. *(He laughed.)* They call me *guruma*.

Himanshu: On the way back to my *mama's* place, my mind kept on replaying Subh's advice on self-acceptance and being truthful to parents. Meanwhile, I was receiving a lot of messages from the girl with whom I was planning to get married. I didn't know how to respond to her. What would I say to her? It all felt so mechanical, and worse, it would be fake. I just couldn't take it anymore.

I was awake the whole night and came out to my mother the very next day. She was so shocked; she didn't speak to me for two days. Even when she accompanied me on the flight back to Hyderabad, she didn't utter a single word. When I tried to explain it to her, she asked me whether this had something to do with the guy I had gone to meet a couple of days ago. It took her a while to understand, and when she did, she asked me, "Are you like ..... this well-known celebrity?" That was my cue that she had started to understand all of this. During her stay in Hyderabad, I would talk to Subh for hours on the phone; she suspected that this must be the same guy.

But my Mom was the second person in the family I came out to. Much earlier, I came out to my brother, just before I started my PhD program. I was smoking weed then. It made it easier to come out when I was high. His first reaction was, "You don't look gay." He was confused and also uncomfortable. He had a girlfriend; the relationship was inter-caste, and he wondered how my sexuality would affect an already complicated situation. My Dad, too, was not comfortable. He said, "This is not organic. Our society has created a structure with a certain aim and intention. Marriage and reproduction are part of that aim, a duty." His viewpoint somewhat changed later, after Subh and I settled down.

Subh: His coming out was his way of sending a signal to me, but I still didn't get it. I remember one day when he was talking to me on the phone, and I noticed that his tone would change. After this happened a couple of times, I challenged him, "Are you uncomfortable about who you are? That

someone would come to know you are gay? Or that you are talking to a gay friend?"

Himanshu: He was right. I was afraid of being overheard, afraid of people coming to know about my sexuality. Slowly, I started coming out to friends. Luckily, it went well. However, they were indeed shocked. They didn't expect me to be gay. My bestie did ask whether I had fallen under someone's (bad) influence. He mentioned that I should see a psychiatrist. So, I had an online consultation with a psychiatrist. After the psychiatrist stated that I was normal, my friend accepted me. Later, when I went to his house for dinner, he said to me, in front of his wife, "You are my rainbow." It felt so good.

Subh: It was when he called and said he would like to come to Bengaluru again to meet me that I started to suspect. He came well-dressed, keeping in mind my choice of clothes. He brought me a watch as a gift.

We were talking for a while, and then he noticed that I had the dating app on my mobile. He was furious. "Why are you on it?" I said, "Are we dating that I should uninstall it for you?" His anger indicated that he was serious about the relationship. We talked a lot that day and the next. He cooked for me and, over the song 'Perfect' by Ed Sheeran, proposed to me. I accepted but told him bluntly, "You love me, and I like you, but I can't say that I am in love with you. I need commitment, honesty, and a sense of belonging so that as we mature, our love and affection will grow. We have to have love grow together." He accepted that. Soon, I announced to all my friends that we were seeing each other.

Himanshu: From then on, every other week, I would travel to his place, or he would come to Hyderabad. After a couple of months, my Mom accidentally found out, through a friend, that I was travelling frequently to Bengaluru to meet Subh. I remember being with my friends at the Third Wave Coffee

café when she called me and gave me a tongue-lashing. "If you are up to something, be open about it. Don't hide, don't lie. I would rather hear it from you than come to know through some other person." From then on, whenever I made plans to visit Bengaluru, I would call her and tell her.

(We took a short break as Himanshu served me Darjeeling rose tea.)

Subh: At that time, I was still uncertain about this relationship. I had not fully recovered from my previous breakup and was experiencing problems at work. And there was another reason for this uncertainty.

Himanshu: That uncertainty arose because, after I finished my PhD, I had two options– either pursue a post-doctorate or seek a job. I was inclined to do my post-doctorate.

Subh: This was a difficult time for me. We wanted to stay and be together, but since both of us were career-minded, a lot depended on his next step. The future was uncertain. There was a possibility that if he moved far away, the relationship might not last. I was also facing problems at my job; I was seeking a new opportunity, and within a couple of months, I found a new one. During that phase, everything was so uncertain.

But despite the uncertainty, I was fixated on the fact that I wanted to get engaged to him. Getting engaged has always been a dream moment for me, something I envisioned sharing with the one I love. I never approached it with doubt, even if the future held uncertainty. I've always carried a positive mindset, believing that I can make it work. That's why this engagement meant so much; it was my dream come true.

I chose to share this moment with the people who have truly mattered, the ones who have supported me from the very

beginning of my journey, especially since the moment I embraced my gay identity. Their love and impact have shaped my path, and it felt right to celebrate with them. And so, I started planning for the engagement.

Himanshu: I had no clue about this. He had planned it as a surprise at his birthday bash.

Subh: *(smiling naughtily)* I booked a venue and invited around 40-50 people —my friends, colleagues, and neighbours —for my birthday party. Only two or three of my close friends were aware of the surprise. One of my friend's friend came to do our makeup. We celebrated my birthday bash on the lawn, complete with cake cutting, drinks, and more. My sister was aware of the plan, and she flew down from West Bengal for the event.

I then requested the crowd to move indoors to the dance floor. As planned, the same song that he had played when proposing to me- 'Perfect' came on. Until then, I was excited, but as the song started playing, I suddenly became nervous. I grabbed the mike and started crying. I tried to locate the engagement ring in my pocket, but I was trembling so much I couldn't find it. In one hand, I held the mike, my bawling amplified by the speakers for all to hear, and my other hand was desperately trying to find the ring in my pocket.

Himanshu: And I stood there shell-shocked. I realised what was happening. I had difficulty breathing. I, too, started to cry. And then he brought out the rings. Subh's sister and our friends all became very emotional.

(Both were silent for a while, lost in their worlds.)

Subh: I wanted to invite his parents, but intentionally didn't. I was sure that his mother would try to discourage me from the engagement, and I didn't want anyone to stop me. I could understand her perspective. Himanshu's brother was about to

get married. After his family found out about our engagement, they were very upset. 'Scared' is the right word. *Log kya kahenge?* (How will people react to this?)

Himanshu: Yeah. Soon after, my brother got married. Subh was invited, but he chose not to attend. He was clear that he didn't want to pretend we were just friends in front of the relatives. He said he'd rather meet the family later, in a space where he could be authentic. I tried to explain that the wedding was about my brother and his to-be wife, and we shouldn't shift the focus onto ourselves. But he disagreed, and I respected his decision. I understood his perspective, even though it wasn't easy.

Subh: Soon after his brother's marriage, I went and met Himanshu's parents. I felt that I owed them a dialogue about our engagement. They asked me very politely about why we got engaged. I tried to express my point of view. Over the next couple of days, as I conversed with Himanshu's Dad and assisted his Mom in the kitchen, things began to change for the better. His Dad was very impressed that I was sorted and clear about responsibilities and finances. Also, I was into cars just like him.

Q. *Did you guys have any fights? Especially since you (Subh) are so assertive.*

Subh: Oh yes, lots! But there was only one, which was terrible. It was a make-or-break fight. Once, I think it was in late 2023, we all visited Amritsar with my sister, Himanshu's Mom, brother and sister-in-law. During the local travel around the city, a gay couple from Amritsar joined us. But then, O My God! Things took an unexpected turn. *(A horrified look spread across Subh's face.)* It led to the biggest fight between Himanshu and me.

The couple made me feel uncomfortable. You know, sometimes you can just sense when people around you start

giving off negative vibes. After a while, they started making some comments about me that didn't go down well with me. Because they were Himanshu's friends, I couldn't confront them openly. Himanshu simply ignored them, but my anger began to build up slowly. After a while, I simply couldn't take it any longer. Under some silly pretext, I got angry with Himanshu and lashed out at him. Right in front of his mother, brother, my sister, and the gay couple. Oh God! At that point, I was on the verge of leaving for Bengaluru. Had I done that, that would have been the end of our relationship.

His Mom and brother were shocked. His brother got upset and asked me, "How can you raise your voice like that?" Himanshu took him outside and pacified him. The gay couple accompanied them outside and then left. Before leaving, their parting repartee was "*Is mein kya khas hai. Aur milenge*." (What's so special about him? You can meet others.) Luckily, we survived the fight. Such quarrels shouldn't ever happen. Even now, I feel bad about it.

(Both of them were quiet for a while.)

Subh: The next day, as we visited various Gurudwaras, I was very quiet. It's a complete contrast to the yammering I do all the time. Finally, his Mom said to me, "Why are you quiet? Why aren't you addressing me as *Sasu Ma* (mother-in-law)?" That dissolved the tension. Before leaving, she said, "*Beta, ladna mat.*" (Don't fight.)

Himanshu: In a way, I think the fight brought us closer.

(After a pause, he went on.)

Anyway, before I could take a call about a postdoctoral position or a job, my mentor received a call from his colleague about some vacancies in Pune at a life sciences company. I applied for it and was selected.

Subh: Luckily, the company where I was working has a branch in Pune. Once he decided to take the job and relocate to Pune, I began searching for an apartment for us in Pune.

In June 2023, I came to Pune, met the company team at the Pune branch, had a look around and also got a chance to attend Pune's 11th Annual LGBTIQ Pride March organised by Anil Ukarande (President of Yutak Charitable Trust.) Soon afterwards, I sought a transfer to Pune. My manager in Bengaluru was very supportive.

Himanshu: Since he is into financial matters, he searched and booked an apartment in Pune. However, when I arrived in Pune, the flat was still under construction, and I had to stay in a rented apartment for around six months. We finally got possession of this flat in January 2024.

Initially, Subh had a lot of trouble adjusting to Pune. I had a couple of months to settle down and adjust to this city before Subh got his transfer and moved here. Additionally, since I had been moving around every couple of years for the past decade, I found it easier to adjust to a new place. But…

Subh: ...But I was leaving Bengaluru after 18 years. It was very difficult for me to adjust to the changes, and that disturbed me a lot. While staying in the rented place, I had several minor disputes with Himanshu. But once we had our place, I think I settled down. Both of us got engrossed in setting up the place, buying furniture, and decorating it. Finally, we had our place, with Poko as our baby.

Himanshu invited his parents. We all went on a vacation first to Lonavala, then spent a couple of days in Alibaug, and then headed to Mumbai. His parents were happy to see us happy.

It's been almost one and a half years now. I have changed somewhat during this period. I didn't tell you till now, but I have Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD.) After we

settled down, I noticed that I have become less compulsive.

Himanshu: I, too, have adjusted to his OCD. I take extra care to see that things are kept in the exact spot or designated place. When my parents came to visit, things were chaotic, and Subh was afraid that he would freak out, but that didn't happen. He was able to control that.

Subh: Now that we are settled, we have started planning for our future. Generally, I am the one who is into financial planning, so I guide him on his investments as he is too academic and doesn't take much interest in finances. But slowly, he is learning financial management from me. Initially, we would spend a lot on branded clothes, etc., but now we no longer do so. We have seriously started saving for retirement. When we retire, we want to plan it in such a way that his parents shall stay close by. We will likely move from this place in a few years. But for the next few years, we plan to stay here and keep our career and financial security as our top priority.

Interviewer's commentary:
As the interview drew to a close, Subh took me on a tour of their apartment. Each room had a rainbow-coloured object or ornament. Each room was spic and span, and I became nervous, wondering whether, during the lunch that would follow, I would incur Subh's wrath, as I am a bit sloppy.

We came back into the living room and sat down.

Himanshu: *(busy laying the tablecloth)* I think both of us are now very secure. In the initial stage, I was very insecure and would check his phone often.

Subh: Life is unpredictable, and all we can do is stay hopeful. What is meant to stay with us will stay, and what is not, we must learn to let go. This is what life has taught me. So, I am happy and content, but I miss the social life of Bengaluru.

Since we live far away in the suburbs (of Pune), we haven't found many friends in Pune. On the social front, I feel sad, especially since I'm such a social person. However, on a personal level, I am very content. Him too. Touch wood. *(He knocked on the wooden table.)*

(We sat down for lunch. As Subh and Himanshu laid out three plates and served, I asked my last question.)

Q. *Have you thought of expanding your family through adoption?*

Subh: We did give it a thought, but I don't have that longing for kids. He has.

Himanshu: I sometimes think of it. I have a lot of parental instinct, but I don't think it will happen.

Subh: Having a baby is just too much responsibility. I don't know how you can look after a baby and also prioritise your career. One should have parental instinct and also be willing to give it priority over your career.

Himanshu: We both love dogs and cats. Taking care of Poko fulfils some of my parenthood urges.

Subh: *(Subh had prepared three items using his recipes- he hadn't named them yet.)* This *laddu*-looking item is sour in taste, the *Paratha* is spicy, and the *Paneer* dish is a bit sweet.

Q. *(Gorging on the mouthwatering lunch, I prodded Subh,) Why don't you write a recipe book?*

Interviewer's commentary:
Subh was excited about the idea and roped in Himanshu to come up with creative names for his dishes.

Finally, as I got up to leave, Poko assumed that he would be

going out, too. Wagging his tail, he started following me. As I put on my shoes, I commented that he must be feeling lonely.

Picking Poko up, Himanshu and Subh came to the elevator to see me off. I punched the button, and as I waited for the elevator, I turned around. Poko was looking at me with soulful eyes. "Bye-bye, Poko", I said.

Himanshu: *(lifed Poko's paw to wave.)* Bye Bye. You know we tried to mate him with a couple of bitches. But he was not interested at all. But when he met a male dog on our morning walk, he was delighted. We are almost certain that Poko is gay.

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Prathamesh & Gaurav

Interviewer's commentary:
I have known Prathamesh since he joined Quest-Prayatna (a gay support group founded by Omkar in collaboration with a psychiatrist friend of mine.) I had first met him there at one of the events organised by the group. Later, when I started work on the book Antaranga (Experience sharing by Gays and Lesbians), I asked him whether he would like to narrate his story for the book. He had agreed to do so, but as an alias, since he was not out to his parents at the time. He had narrated his story to me; I had taken notes. However, after the interview, he backed off, and his story was not included in the book.

We kept in touch on and off, mainly via Facebook. I heard from someone that he had moved to another state for work. So, it came as a bit of a surprise when I received an invitation from him to attend his 5th anniversary with his partner, Gaurav. Till then, I didn't know he had a partner. At the anniversary celebration, I met his partner, Gaurav, for the first time.

When I asked him about giving an interview for this book, he said he would discuss it with Gaurav and get back to me. I was unsure whether they would assent to the interview, but I was in for a pleasant surprise: he responded affirmatively. I requested that the three of us meet in person for the interview before Prathamesh left town. The gaps in the interview could be addressed during subsequent conference calls.

The following story is based on our discussions. All names used in this chapter are aliases, as requested by participants.

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Interviewer's commentary:
The place we had decided to meet in the morning, turned out to be closed. Prathamesh suggested another place which was close to his house. We settled down. As the waiter served water and handed over the menu, I studied the two. Prathamesh had hardly changed. He was fair, roly-poly, and cheerful. In contrast, Gaurav was taller, slim and with wavy hair.

Without studying the menu, Prathamesh and I quickly decided what we wanted, but Gaurav kept scanning the menu over and over again, trying to make up his mind. It turned out that shopping with Gaurav was also a similar experience for Prathamesh.

Prathamesh: I am done shopping in a flash. But for Gaurav, it's…

Gaurav: I like spending hours exploring styles and clothes, and then if I am still dissatisfied with the available collection in one shop, I hop on to some other place, spend time exploring the collection there and then finally zero down on the collection I earlier explored and come back again to the earlier shop to purchase it…

Prathamesh: It's so irritating… *(he gave an expression that was a mixture of irritation and amazement, both- 'How could anyone spend so much time like this?')*

Q. *Prathamesh, the last time we spoke about your personal life was more than 12 years ago. At that time, you were not out. How are things now?*

Prathamesh: A lot has changed. I did my Master's. I wanted to pursue my PhD, but that didn't work out. I continued as a scientist in various companies. A year ago, I got a good job opportunity in another state. It is a less stressful job, offering more free time and significantly higher remuneration.

On the personal front, I met Omkar through Facebook, and I became part of his gay group *Quest-Prayatna*, which helped me a lot in accepting myself. The only concern was finding the right time to come out.

After my elder sister's marriage, it was my turn. Mom and Dad started pressuring me to get married. I tried to avoid coming out as much as possible, but finally, in 2019, I came out to my sister. Surprisingly, she took it well. She works in a Corporation, and they had a session on LGBTIQ awareness as part of their DEI initiative. After she heard me out, she said, "*Accha, te mhanje he ka?*" (Oh! This is what they were talking about!) Then I came out to my brother-in-law. He, too, was cool about it but advised me to let my parents know that I wasn't going to get married. It is unfair to them to keep hoping for my marriage and searching for a bride for me. I agreed and told my Mom that I would not marry. I did not tell her the reason. Predictably, she was upset, but despite her insistence, I did not come out to her at that time. Later that year, we moved to a new place. Since it was the start of a new life in the new home, I felt that would be the right time to tell Mom and Dad that I was gay.

As you know, Dad and I are not on good terms. We are opposites in every possible way. It is my poor Mom who has to bear the brunt of this and gets caught in the crossfire. Dad's reaction was as expected, "*He mala manya nahi*." (I don't accept this.) With Mom, there was a lot of *rada-rad* (crying). Dad insisted that we visit a psychologist. The psychologist patiently explained to my parents that this was not an illness and that it couldn't be changed. So that was it.

Q. *So, have they come to terms with the situation?*

Prathamesh: More or less. Not completely. When I got the current job and was leaving Pune, my Dad said, "Now that you are leaving and going to be staying alone, you should get married." I didn't respond to that.

Q. *When did you meet Gaurav?*

Prathamesh: I was in a relationship for two years with a guy from another state. We loved each other so much. However, after completing his studies, he had to return to his home state. I tried to seek a job in his state, but that didn't work out. We tried to keep the long-distance relationship going. But how long could it continue? Not being together, not being there to share our happiness and sorrow, no physical intimacy. It hurt badly. It didn't help that the parting was on a call. It was depressing for a while, and I was desperate to seek company, not just any company, but a long-term partner. I met Gaurav through Grindr.

Q. *Gaurav, could you tell me a bit about your background?*

Gaurav: Like Prathamesh, I come from a middle-class background. I am a single son and live with my Mom, Dad, and Grandma. I earned my degree in Information Technology Engineering and subsequently held several positions. However, I soon realised that it wasn't my cup of tea. I enjoyed marketing and digital design much more.

Q. *Gaurav, are you out to your family?*

Gaurav: Yes, but my Grandma doesn't know; it's an unspoken pact between my parents and me not to tell her.

Q. *How did you come out?*

Gaurav: A few years ago, an incident occurred. I was dating someone on Facebook, and we had a fight. He got upset and threatened to come home and out me to all. He also scribbled my mobile number in men's urinals, proclaiming my availability. I started getting dozens of calls day and night. Then I told my parents that I met a friend on Facebook, fought with him, and he was spreading lies about me and threatening to come to our house. I made no mention that we were dating.

He didn't come home, and that was the end of it. At that time, my parents had no clue.

But two years later, in 2017, I was dating someone, and my Mom checked my mobile, which was lying on the bed, unlocked. She saw some intimate photos with my boyfriend. They were not porno photos but photos of us in lovey-dovy poses. Enough to indicate that these were not buddy-buddy photos. She asked me about them. I replied, "Yes, I am gay." She didn't take it well. There was a lot of crying, "*He aplya sanskritit nasta.*" (We don't have such things in our culture). But I was firm. She told Dad. They said that they would take me to a doctor.

Q. *Did they?*

Gaurav: No, they mentioned it but didn't take the step. Later on, they realised that I was also attending gay parties and fretted about it. But I stood my ground. I am quite comfortable with who I am. Seeing movies like *Dostana*, *Page 3* gave me a good idea of who I was. It was no big deal for me; it was a big deal for Mom. In Dad's case, we didn't have a one-on-one conversation about it.

Q. *Gaurav, is this your first relationship?*

Gaurav: No. I was in a relationship with another guy for a year. But he was Bi-sexual and made it clear that eventually he would marry a girl. He was upfront about it. That was good. But there was no point in being emotionally involved when the relationship had no future, so we parted ways. There was no bitterness. I started seeking another man in my life, and that's how I met Prathamesh.

Q. *And this was in?*

Gaurav: We first met in February 2020. We dated for about a month and decided that this was worth exploring for the long

term. I wanted someone older than me; I am now 25, and he is 32. Other than that, I feel that many similarities helped. We were both from Pune, spoke Marathi, and were Hindu, belonging to the same caste, so we shared the same cultural lifestyle. Both of us lived very close by, so we could meet daily. Both of us are a bit religious.

Prathamesh: I need to clarify that these were not conditions for a relationship, but these similarities helped in building a bond. Also, there were no ideological differences. We do not have any political ideology. So, there was no ideological clash either.

Gaurav: Yeah. I vote for a person who does good work in my Ward. My vote is not based on which Party or ideology he/she belongs to. Our discussion about politics is limited to identifying who is doing good work in our Ward. Otherwise, politics doesn't interest us.

Q. *Are there any differences?*

Gaurav: Both like tidiness, but I am more into it than Prathamesh. So, for example, if he says, I will fold the clothes in a while, I won't wait for him to do it. I will do it because I like it. Umm... What else? Prathamesh likes children, and I don't. Prathamesh loves cats, and I love dogs. *(He adds, laughing),* When we start to live together, maybe we will settle for a third animal like a bird or both if the dog and the cat can get along.

Q. *Do you have arguments? Fights?*

Prathamesh: Fights, no. Arguments yes. Generally, it ends up with one of us giving up for the sake of the other. We haven't had any serious issues so far. When there are arguments, we subtly back off.

Gaurav: I believe that for a healthy relationship, partners

should not be overbearing. It is essential to give others sufficient space and time. We respect others' 'me time'. I think that is very crucial.

Q. *Have both of you told your families about the relationship?*

Gaurav: Yes, in a way. Initially, my Mom used to ask me, "*To kon ahe? Tu kayam tyachya barobar ka astos?*" (Who is he? Why do you always hang out with him?) She treats him well, though. She knows about us, but doesn't want to face it. *(He added, laughing,)* The last time Prathamesh came home, she told him, "You should get married."

Prathamesh: My parents are aware of our relationship. Mom is quite accepting, but Dad is not happy about it.

Interviewer's commentary:
Maybe seeing Gaurav makes him face something he doesn't want to.

Prathamesh: *(laughing)* Yes, I think so too.

Q. *Are you out at your workplace or with your friends? About your sexuality and your relationship?*

Gaurav: I am out as a gay man, and I am in a gay relationship at my workplace. I am out to some of my friends. I have more straight friends than gay friends. All of my friends, without exception, have been accepting.

Prathamesh: I am out to a few of my friends, but I am not out at work, either as a gay man or that I am in a gay relationship. I am not out to relatives either. This means that, as far as our relatives are concerned, we can't attend weddings and other functions as a couple. We only attend events as a couple with friends who are aware of our relationship. So, there are limitations on coming out in public as a couple.

Q. *How has the transfer to another city affected the relationship?*

Gaurav: It is hard. For four years, we were staying close to each other, if not together. So, we could meet each other at any time of the day or night. We would meet almost daily. He would come over and stay at my house on some weekends. I couldn't stay at his house because his Dad disapproved of our relationship.

However, after he moved, things changed. On the emotional front, there are times when you need the person close to you - such as to cry or celebrate good occasions. Now, we have to do that all on a video call. That saddens me. *Pan kai karnar?* (What can we do?)

Now, every couple of months, either I travel to his place and stay with him for a week or so, or he comes to Pune, and we spend time together. Before, when he switched jobs, we would enjoy short vacations to the Konkan and relax on the beaches. Now, even that is not possible. It's challenging.

On the physical front, we made one change. For the first four years, when he was in Pune, we were in a monogamous relationship. Now, for the past year, we have been in an open relationship.

Q. *Are you worried that you could fall in love with your date or that jealousy of your partner could affect your relationship?*

Gaurav: No, absolutely not. We look at it as just a physical need; there is no emotional connection in these casual interactions. We share a history spanning years. A one-night stand can't compare with that history. So, our relationship is not affected by it.

Q. *So, in this long-distance relationship, what keeps you*

busy?

Prathamesh: Nature photography, heritage photography. I have cherished that hobby for more than a decade.

Q. *Yes, I have seen some lovely photos on FB. If I remember correctly, you also enjoyed swimming, right?*

Prathamesh: Yes, but now I no longer have the time to pursue that. Instead of swimming, reading has become my primary hobby. For the past year or so, I have also started learning the Violin.

Q. *So, are you planning to take exams?*

Prathamesh: No way. I am not at all interested in exams; I don't want to prove anything to anybody. I am learning the instrument because I want to enjoy playing it. *(getting excited)* I am looking forward to a music concert that's being organised in my city… where I work.

Q. *Gaurav?*

Gaurav: I enjoy dancing.

Q. *Do you mean Kathak, Bharatnatyam?*

Gaurav: No. No. I started dancing to Bollywood songs at the age of 10 or 11. I enjoy that a lot. Additionally, I also participate in Zumba classes at the gym. Dancing is a good stress buster.

Q. *So, what are your plans for the future?*

Prathamesh: No idea. It's very uncertain. Will we settle in Pune? Renting an apartment and staying together, in Pune, will traumatise our parents. Although we are not staying together, my Mom keeps on worrying, "*Tyanna (natevaik)*

sangitla nahiyes na? Tyanna mahit nahi na?" (You haven't told that person (relative) about your relationship, right? They don't know about you two, right?) We also share some distant relatives. Settling down in Pune seems out of the question. Then what do we do? Where and when do we settle down? It's all up in the air.

Q. *Although many issues need to be resolved, have you started planning for them? For example, although you don't stay together, do you pool some funds for common expenses? Savings/investments?*

Prathamesh: We have a joint savings account, and each of us has a separate savings account. We pool our money in a joint savings account and spend from it when we're together. That is easier than keeping tabs on who has paid for what. As far as investing for the future and retirement is concerned, I have my investments, but it is a personal exercise, not a joint one.

Gaurav: I have not planned either for the future or for retirement.

Q. *How about medical insurance?*

Prathamesh: I am covered by the company.

Gaurav: My company is small and does not offer medical coverage. I am not covered by private medical healthcare insurance either.

Interviewer's commentary:
I launched my usual spiel. "Having medical insurance is very, very important, and I recommend you buy one. These days, hospital bills can easily run into lakhs of rupees. I know some friends who have benefited from my advice." Gaurav nodded absentmindedly, as people often do when they receive unsolicited advice.

Q. *I know Prathamesh is in town for only a few days and will be leaving soon. When are you planning to meet again?*

Prathamesh: Probably in June. My Guru is planning to organise a Violin concert. I, along with other disciples, shall be playing at the event. So, I plan to be there.

Q. *Is it open to the public? If so, do extend me an invitation. I would love to attend.*

Prathamesh: *(smiling)* Oh, yes. I will.

Interviewer's commentary:
He did invite me, but I was unable to attend as my Mom's caretaker was on leave.

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Omkar & Pierre

Interviewer's commentary:
19th April 2025. As I strolled into 'Harshal Banquet & Halls', I wondered who from the Quest-Prayatna group would be attending. I was attending Omkar's younger brother, Hrushikesh's, marriage.

When Omkar extended the invitation to me on WhatsApp, I had half-jokingly asked him to marry Pierre at the same time in the same hall. He had replied, 'Idea changali ahe'. (It's a good idea). I had time and again insisted that he also get married in India (although the marriage had no legal sanction in India) with Hindu rituals, and the luncheon that would follow should be the typical food that used to be served in Brahmin marriages- 'Aluchi bhaaji', Bhaji, 'Batata bhaaji', Alucha Phadphada, Masaale-bhaat, Sadha-bhaat, Jilebi, Mattha, etc. all served on a large banyan leaf, decorated with rangoli adorning its borders, the cloying scent of agarbattis stuck in potatoes placed near the banyan leaves, lending the luncheon a solemn feel. This tradition had sadly changed in these modern times; it was now invariably a buffet with Punjabi food. I craved the old experience. (I didn't know then that some of the items I had listed would be part of the meal that would be served at lunch that day.)

I have known Omkar since 2010, when he started a gay support group Quest-Prayatna in Pune in collaboration with a pychiatrist friend of mine. They conducted monthly support group meetings at 'Open Space' on FC Road. I was then President of Samapathik Trust, which worked on LGBTIQ health and advocacy.

In 2012, Quest-Prayatna organised the first-ever parents' meet for LGBTIQ individuals in Pune, at which my Mom and I were interviewed.

For Quest-Prayatna, Omkar's mother was a pillar of support. She wrote about her experience in my book Manachiye Gunti (Experience sharing by Parents of Gays and Lesbians). She continued to be very vocal about LGBTIQ rights until she contracted Parkinson's illness, and after a long-drawn illness, she passed away in 2024.

I stepped into the hall and looked around for familiar faces. Soon, I found Pierre. He stood out as a white male dressed in a sober cobalt blue Shervani. I complimented him on the dress. He responded, saying, "I think I am a bit overdressed." "No, you are not", I replied. "Oh! Ok. We went shopping yesterday, and the other dresses that were suggested to me were just too glittery and shimmering. I told them they look good (he grimaced as he remembered the experience), but they are not for me."

Pierre was Omkar's husband and had come from Luxembourg to India to attend the wedding. I had met them both a few days ago and conducted an in-depth interview. That turned out to be the second part of the interview. The first part of the interview was conducted on WhatsApp a couple of weeks prior. What follows is their story.

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Interviewer's commentary:
As I walked into the Conrad Hotel (Pune), I saw Pierre heading towards the lounge where Omkar sat engrossed, texting someone. After the greetings, we sat down in a cosy corner.

Q. *Omkar, so, how are the wedding preparations going on?*

(Omkar narrated details of the umpteen pre-marriage rituals and concluded that it was too much for them. It had been very tiring, coupled with the searing heat of April in India.)

Omkar: *(looking at Pierre,)* How is it for you, Pierre? With so many people in the house yesterday at the pre-wedding rituals? Given your introvert nature?

Pierre: Well, it was okay. You were there so I could stand it, I suppose.

Omkar: It's been what? Almost 12 years have passed since we were together. It will be twelve years this August and five and a half years since we got married. We got married on January 17, 2020, in Belgium. It was a City Hall wedding; we had invited four people in all. After the wedding, we went to a bar, drank and had lunch. That was it! After the wedding, I wanted to organise a garden tea party for my close friends and colleagues, but COVID played a spoilsport. Now, looking back, I feel that nurturing the relationship is way more important than the elaborate rituals and lavish celebrations that accompany weddings.

Pierre: *(nodding)* Yeah! I don't care for such things either.

Q. *Okay! But first things first, Pierre, how did the two of you meet? You are from Belgium, and Omkar is from Pune.*

Pierre: My Mom worked as a Psychiatric Nurse in Belgium for a long time, even before I was born. In 1978, when I was around 3 years old, my Mom came on an exposure visit to India. My Dad took care of my elder sister, my elder brother, and me. After she was back, I heard from her about India.

Later, after I had completed my MA in History and obtained my Teacher's Certificate for secondary school (I never taught in school, by the way), I became a Flight Attendant and travelled a lot. Eventually, in April 2013, I visited India on vacation and travelled to Kerala. I loved the place. The setting, the massages… beautiful! It was before this visit that I met Omkar on Planet Romeo (PR.)

Omkar: I was then working in Hyderabad. *(After a pause, he added,)* In those days, many people looked down on those who dated on PR. It implied promiscuity and an immoral attitude. It was indeed for hookups… but that supercilious attitude irritated me.

Interviewer's commentary:
Things were very different then. The legal battle on Section 377 of the IPC was being fought in the Supreme Court. Other than LGBTIQ NGO Drop-In Centres, which very few would frequent, the only places gay men could meet other gay men were parties, cruising sites or online dating platforms (during those days, there were very few of them). So, whether you wanted a one-night stand or were looking for a long-term partner, you had to scout the same forums.

Omkar: We got talking; we would message or call, but the calls were expensive. WhatsApp was not very common then. At the end of Pierre's vacation, when he was about to fly to Belgium from Mumbai, I flew to Mumbai to meet him.

Pierre: We liked each other, and frankly, I was looking for something long-term. At the back of my mind, there was always this lingering possibility. At that time, I was already married (to a man), but I couldn't get along with him and had filed for divorce. It had not come through then, but I wanted to move on and have someone in my life.

Omkar: We liked each other, but our natures are very different. Pierre is shy and introverted. He is not promiscuous. He is a demisexual. I was promiscuous, and I was dating even when we were talking. Like Pierre, who was seeking a long-term relationship, I also desired a long-term commitment. Still, I had conditioned myself to have casual encounters, not knowing how things would work out in a setting where everything and everybody —religion, laws, and society —were against us. Unlike him, for me, it was always fire and forget.

Pierre: Yeah, I have been shy and an introvert from the time I can remember. I didn't exhibit the typical 15-year-old streak of rebellion. Mom thought all was okay because I was quiet. Well! It wasn't. I was 23 years old when I came out to my parents, late by our standards. Till then, nobody asked me about my sexuality, as our culture is very different. Parents do not ask their children about their personal lives. When I came out to Mom, she said she had suspected, and then she told Dad. He is an introvert, too, just like me, and he just shrugged it off. It was like, 'Why am I being told personal details?' From the perspective of your culture, it may appear that he was unhappy or uncomfortable. But that's not so- it's a mix of our culture and his nature. It's not considered polite to discuss anyone's personal life. Mom said, "I will have to make peace with the fact that I will not have grandchildren", and that was it.

Omkar: After meeting Pierre, I also started seriously thinking about a long-term relationship. We continued to discuss our expectations of each other and our future. In December 2013, he returned to India and revisited Kerala. *(laughs)*. There, at the hotel, a Japanese tourist told him that he looked like he was in love. Well! he was. He came down to Pune and insisted that I introduce him to my family.

Interviewer's commentary:
Omkar came from an extremely conservative background. His father was very conservative and dominating. In his mother's words (translated from the book Manachiye Gunti (Experience sharing by Parents of Gays and Lesbians.) - "His father was very traditional and superstitious. He was at his best when following all the traditions and religious rituals. An orthodox Brahmin, his behaviour would often hurt us, but he didn't care. Nobody in the family dared to have an independent mind. It ended up alienating the children. Omkar was scared of his father and wouldn't go anywhere near him..."

Omkar: I was a bit feminine. I was teased and made fun of in school. Being an introvert, I had difficulty communicating, so I bore the harassment quietly.

After my father passed away in 2000, it was my Mom who became the man of the house, taking care of me, my elder sister and my younger brother. I was my Mom's favourite, and she was looking forward to my marriage and having grandchildren. My sexuality came as a bit of a shock to her; it took a couple of months for her to recover. She put in a lot of effort to understand the issue, and eventually, she, along with my brother, became a strong supporter of mine. My sister, who is more traditional like my Dad, was not too pleased and expressed her displeasure in no uncertain terms to my mother. Thankfully, my mother sided with me.

After my Dad passed away, the dynamics in our house had changed dramatically. We would talk about anything and everything under the sun. Eventually, when I started dating Pierre, I mentioned this to Mom and my brother, and both were very supportive.

Pierre came to Pune and met my Mom and brother. He had a typical Brahmin lunch of *Varan Bhat* (split pigeon pea stew and rice) and *Puran Poli* (traditional sweet flatbread originating in Maharashtra.) My Mom, who had been diagnosed with Parkinson's in 2007, her health deteriorating every passing day, was particularly happy that I finally had a partner to take care of me.

Later, my sister came to meet Pierre. She behaved pretty decently with him, but she was very uncomfortable with the idea of a same-sex relationship. I must add that over the last decade or so, she has become increasingly accepting of Pierre, mainly because of their similar characteristics —careful planning, cleanliness, and tidiness, among others. I think that in this aspect, I share a stronger sisterly bond with my close friend, Vaishali Ghunkikar-Kambli. When I

confided in Vaishali about my relationship with Pierre, she was very delighted.

Q. *So, how did you work out the next step? Living together?*

Omkar: We thought about it a lot. Should Pierre move to India, or should I move to Belgium? As Pierre can't stand the chaos, heat, and dust, if we had to settle in India, it would have to be Kerala. But we felt that starting everything anew there was too big a risk to take, so we decided on Belgium. Gay-friendly laws in Belgium were a big plus.

Pierre: In fact, after the Netherlands, Belgium became only the second country in the world to legalise gay marriage in 2004. The thing is, Belgium has played a big role in the LGBT rights movement. It's just that we don't go tom-toming about it. Oh! And before you get it wrong, let me clarify: it's not as if there is no homophobia. Yes, it exists there as well, but the government does not overtly or covertly support it. The government does not treat gays as a special community; it does not give them any special rights for being gay, but at the same time, it doesn't discriminate against gays either. In short, the government lets you be what you are.

(After a pause, Pierre went on.) You know all these developments in America- President Donald Trump scrapping DEI (Diversity, Equity and Inclusion.) We have no concept of DEI.

Omkar:*(interjected)* Neither the concept of CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) on the lines of India.

Pierre: If America were to ask American companies operating in Belgium to close their DEI programs, there would be nothing to close. We have all our legal rights: marriage, adoption, medical insurance for all, and pension for all. In Europe, we do not expect corporations to do this job (DEI, etc.). All they have to do is just adhere to the legal

framework.

Omkar: Yeah! In addition to having gay-friendly laws, Belgium also has a robust social security system, including a comprehensive pension system. After retirement, you get a monthly pension. The amount depends on your work experience, but even a person with no work experience will receive a minimum pension, ensuring that no one will ever have to go hungry. Medical healthcare insurance is another plus point. It is compulsory for all. The government provides very good quality healthcare insurance and medical facilities. These factors also helped tip the scale in Belgium's favour.

Pierre: I still dream of settling down in idyllic Kerala. I consider it a possibility, a remote one, but still a possibility. I have not closed that door. You know we have these dreams that may not get fulfilled, but you continue to nurture them… this is my dream.

Interviewer's commentary:
I could see the yearning on Pierre's face; it looked like he wanted to be transported to Kerala, his dream world.

Omkar: Once the decision was made, I had to discuss this with my family. I told Pierre I couldn't just pack my bags and leave; I can't be completely independent like a Westerner. My culture dictates that I take everyone into confidence and address their concerns. My sister was married, but my brother was still studying, so I had to take care of the family's financial needs.

The hard part was leaving my sick Mom behind for my younger brother to take care of. But I knew I had to take that call because I was not getting any younger. I was 35+ years old, and I knew Pierre would not wait forever for me. Till then, I had been the man of the house and done everything I was expected to do. I felt I couldn't let go of this opportunity.

From the beginning, when we became serious, we were clear that we wanted to get married. Once Pierre's divorce was finalised, we initiated the legal process. His divorce was finalised in 2018, and I could apply for a Visa only in mid-2019, thanks to the lengthy paperwork and the time it takes in India to prepare all the necessary documents. We applied for a 'Visa for Marriage'. Procuring all the necessary documents was a nightmare, including the birth certificate, Domicile, and PCC (Police Clearance Certificate), among others. Some documents required a 90-day stamping prior to the application, while others required a 180-day stamping prior to the application. I got the Domicile certificate with my birth year wrong, so I had to do it again. Then there was also a requirement of a 'Single Person Certificate' or something to that effect, and so forth… but finally all the efforts paid off.

Q. *Did you consider a Prenuptial Agreement before getting married?*

Interviewer's commentary:
Prenuptial Agreement is not a marriage option; it is just an option to decide how the finances will be split in the event of separation.

Pierre: No, we did not. Since we don't have many assets and don't have children, it didn't make much sense to enter into a prenuptial agreement. Also, unlike India, Belgium and other Western European countries have cohabitation provisions (live-in relationships with a legal framework). Quite a few straight couples opt for cohabitation instead of going for marriage. It is gays who seem to be going in for marriage instead of cohabitation.

Q. *Omkar, when did you meet Pierre's parents?*

Omkar: In 2016, when I was visiting Pierre, who was then working in France, Pierre and I had visited them together in Belgium a couple of times. His Dad is very nice, sober, and

soft-spoken. His Mom is a feminist and prefers monogamy throughout life. It took her a while to accept me. This was not due to my race or sexuality. It was because she was emotionally attached to Pierre's ex-husband, and she didn't want to let go of him.

Pierre: Mom was disturbed by my breakup. She said to me, your breakup is my breakup. I had to explain to her that this was not the case. I had parted ways with my ex amicably, and he could continue to be friends with me and her. My ex still meets her, and they have long conversations. It took a while for her to accept that Omkar was the new person in my life.

(Omkar placed an order for coffee and a pastry.)

Q. *Omkar, was language an issue while communicating with Pierre's parents?*

Omkar: Of course! They don't understand English. I have completed the B1 exam in French. I converse with his parents in rudimentary French, and we do manage to have basic dialogue. Pierre has an older brother who is a psychiatrist, but he also doesn't speak English very well. He was educated in French. In France or francophone Belgium, one need not know English.

(After a pause, he continued.)

A week before I was supposed to get married, I had to fly to Belgium. While I was travelling from Pune to Mumbai, I got a call from Pierre. He was suffering from terrible stomach pain, was badly shivering, and was about to get admitted on an emergency basis in the government hospital.

In Khandala ghat *(a hilly terrain,)* I lost my cell phone connection range; I was totally in a state of panic. I couldn't reach out to him. Later, when I tried calling him again, he didn't pick up my call. I tried to call the hospital, but the nurse

knew only French. She wasn't ready to divulge any confidential information to a stranger who claimed he was Pierre's boyfriend. I then called his ex; he knew only French. I knew only a bit of French. Somehow, I managed to convey the news and requested him to assist Pierre. He immediately rushed to the hospital. Yes! So, language was indeed an issue, as were cultural differences.

(A smile spread on his face as he continued) When Pierre got operated on again after marriage, I was present. As Pierre was being wheeled off into surgery, I was cooing to him, 'Relax, it's going to be okay.' I didn't know that in Belgium, public display of love; wet kissing before surgery is common. After seeing my feeble reassurance, the nurse told me, "It's okay, you can kiss him." I was embarrassed, and I quickly pecked his cheek. I wonder whether this suggestion would have come if the nurse had been a male.

Pierre: *(laughing)* Considering the number of gay men who are nurses, probably yes.

Q. *It is interesting to know that you and Pierre's ex got along well together.*

Omkar: Oh yes! There was no insecurity or jealousy from either side. Even my in-laws were zapped, that we got along so well. This was a pleasant surprise, as not all exes are so mature. I guess one of the reasons for the maturity was our age. Maybe if we were young…

(Omkar started cutting a chocolate-covered pastry for the three of us.)

Q. *How do you handle your differences, related to your personalities or the differences in your cultures?*

Omkar: It's not that difficult. Yes, we do have differences- both personal and cultural. For example, Pierre does not

enjoy socialising much. He loves doing house cleaning on weekends. His hobby is re-modelling the apartment.

Interviewer's commentary:
Both of them took a break to show me photos on their mobile phones of the apartment, which had been remodelled. Both versions looked lovely. The second remodelling, although done in darker colours than the previous one, gave the apartment a very spacious look.

Pierre:*(added proudly)* It took me six months to do it.

Omkar: I am a very social person. I am one of the founders of *Maharashtra Mitra Mandal* (Friend circle of people from Maharashtra) in Luxembourg.

There is also a difference in our work domains. Pierre works as a corporate customer liaison, whereas I work in finance. Many a time, I get home late. At times, I come home, have dinner with Pierre, and again go back to work. Pierre has a regular 8.30 am to 5 pm schedule.

Pierre: I long to spend time with him in the evenings. Since my work is less hectic, I wait for him to be home. I need to see him around. At times, I wonder why he works so much! It is so taxing and tiring for him; it affects the quality of life.

Omkar: I guess, partly, it's the nature of my job and partly my Indian style of working. You have to put in at least 10 hours a day to survive, quality of your life be damned.

(Omkar thought for a minute and added,) The difference in cultures affects us in other ways, too. For example, I believe that Belgians, and maybe Europeans in general, work hard on Plan A. If Plan A fails, they work on it again and again, hitting it from different angles, questioning themselves, and trying to understand why the plan is not working. Coming from an Indian background, I am mentally prepared to change plans.

If Plan A doesn't work, I have Plan B and Plan C also in place, so our approach to a particular problem differs at times. Despite these differences, we have very few arguments. I suppose it's because of our nature. We never had a full-blown quarrel or fight. If Pierre is upset about something, he will quietly withdraw and give himself time, which is his nature.

Pierre: I withdraw for some 'me time' but try to resolve the issue before the day ends. I need to sleep peacefully, putting our differences behind me. I don't like carrying it over for days, giving my husband the silent treatment- that is not my nature.

Omkar: Yes! Pierre has ¼ Italian blood from his mother's side, and occasionally, I see it in full glory, but I know how to handle those spikes and help him cool down. Because of my family background, I have learned to adjust and manage such scenarios.

(After checking a few messages on WhatsApp, Omkar added,) "Some of my friends accuse me, 'If you haven't had any major fights, then you are not in love with each other.' I don't understand this part.

Q. *For them, is that one of the items on the checklist- that you have to tick off before you get certified to be 'In Love'?*

Omkar: Yeah! Something like that. *(Sounding perplexed)* Do we have to quarrel or fight a few times to prove that we love each other? And prove that to whom?

Interviewer's commentary:
I could see he was perturbed. It was almost as if he wanted to prove that he loved Pierre and vice versa, but he was unable to fathom a way to obtain the evidence unless the two of them concocted it. I moved on to a different topic.

Q. *How do you deal with the differences in your religions?*

Pierre: My Mom's family migrated from Italy to Belgium during Mussolini's rule. She comes from an atheist, socialist background. Dad is a Catholic. People assume that all Catholics are conservative and against gay marriage, but that is not so. Yes, some are conservative, but in Belgium, many are Catholic and also progressive, which means they can be open-minded about same-sex families. Both of my parents and Omkar, as well as I, are liberal and left leaning.

My Mom was an atheist, so when her marriage was solemnised, the Church attached a precondition that her children had to be raised as Catholics. So, I attended a Catholic school, but there was no indoctrination. I consider myself an agnostic. *(After a pause, he went on.)* What I observe is that in Western Europe, most religious functions are more akin to carnivals and celebrations, with little emphasis on religious dogma. About Eastern Europe, I am not too sure.

Omkar: Although I hate the oppressive religious environment, I am not anti-religion. I am a believer. Our family has a guru- *Ranade Guru*, from Jamkhandi and all my family members have taken his *diksha* (we are his disciples.) Although my Dad was an economist, his true passion was performing religious rituals and ceremonies for others, and I would often assist him. Eventually, I learned how to perform some of these rituals. There have been a few times when I have been invited by a couple of families in Belgium to do *Satyanarayan Puja*. I do *puja (prayers)* daily at home. At times, Pierre joins me, not because he is a believer, but because it makes me happy. At times, we visit the Church. I like meditating in Church because of the peace and the quiet.

Q. *In 2021, you moved from Belgium to Luxembourg. Can you tell me a bit about that?*

Omkar: We used to stay in Belgium, but our jobs are in Luxembourg. Although it is not very far from Arlon (in

Belgium), where we lived, we decided to move to Luxembourg because I needed to have a work permit. Pierre can work anywhere in Europe because he is a national of the European Union. That is not true for me. Staying in Belgium, I could work in Luxembourg only as Pierre's dependent. However, I did not want my job in Luxembourg to be tied to Pierre having his job in Luxembourg. If he gets a job in another EU country, then what? That could jeopardise my job as well. So, we moved to Luxembourg. As a resident of the country, I could work here independently of where Pierre worked.

We sold our apartment in Belgium and bought one in Luxembourg, which is owned jointly. We have taken a joint loan and continue to pay EMIs (Equated Monthly Instalments) on it. Buying a place in Luxembourg is very costly, but we didn't have much of a choice. We save every penny; we can't afford to be spendthrifts. People assume that we are rich, but they don't see the efforts we take to save money.

Q. *Can you elaborate on that?*

Omkar: Sure! We have separate savings accounts and a joint account. We maintain Excel sheets about our expenses, and *(laughing gleefully)* each one boasts about the amount saved. When planning a vacation, we typically start saving for it. For example, in 2025, we took a vacation to the Seychelles. Staying at a hotel would have been very expensive. So, we searched for an apartment, rented it and cooked in the apartment to save on stay and food. Riches don't come without savings.

Q. *Other than taking vacations once in a while, how do you spend your free time?*

Omkar: Currently, on weekends, we learn Luxembourgish (a mix of German and French) and watch movies by Pedro

Almodovar. He is our favourite director.

Q. *Finally, have you thought of expanding your family? Say adoption?*

Omkar: Pierre doesn't like children, but I love them a lot, and at times, my motherly instincts go overboard. But at this age — I am 45, he's 50 —we don't think that's possible. Also, managing a child and working without the support system that is there in India- grandma, grand-dad, etc., would be a nightmare. Middle-class Indians have maids for cooking and housekeeping. Here, we have to do everything on our own. Although there are crèches, both public and private, there is a waiting list for a vacancy. Until your child is enrolled in the crèche, you will have to manage without that support. That's pretty difficult. I know some straight couples, where one of them had to give up their job to take care of the child.

(Omkar was quiet for a while, his mood sombre. Turning towards me, he said,) It will be very lonely for the other if one of us dies. We are so entwined, happy and content with the life we have now.

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Nitin & Thomas

Interviewer's commentary:
"What is the status of the gay marriage Review Petition?" Nitin asked. I was calling him after Mooknayak 2024 (the annual Marathi LGBTIQ Literature festival organized by my organization, Bindu Queer Rights Foundation, and Yutak Charitable Trust. Nitin and Thomas had been unable to attend the festival; their cat, Isabella, was severely ill. Both are ardent cat lovers. After the event, I called to enquire about her health. She had a severe infection and was prescribed a daily antiviral injection for 84 days. Nitin was stressed, and his voice revealed his worry.*

I have known Nitin for almost 22 years. I first met him at The Humsafar Trust in Mumbai. He was then, in his early thirties. A fair-complexioned, somewhat overweight and quiet person, I had never known him to lose his temper or throw a tantrum. However, apparently, at times, he did, although I had never witnessed it. I knew he was stubborn and hellbent on having his way; this was divulged by his Mom, who had to deal with his stubbornness since his childhood. In our first meeting, Amma (Ashok Row Kavi) had suggested that he become a founding trustee of my organization, Samapathik Trust (I had great difficulty in finding the right kind of trustees - who were out, weren't part of the LGBTIQ political cesspool and equally important were not in activism to rake in the moolah. He had once been a journalist, and when I met him, he was editing the LGBTIQ magazine 'Bombay Dost'. For the past decade, he has held full-time positions in the financial services industry.

I knew very little about Thomas, and I met him for the first time after he had settled down with Nitin.

What follows is an amalgamation of a series of interviews

conducted in informal settings, the first of which took place when I visited them in Mumbai in 2019 to congratulate them on their marriage.

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Interviewer's commentary:
Nitin's father opened the door and warmly welcomed me inside. I took off my shoes, and before I could sit down beside Thomas, who was sprawled on the settee, the feline Isabella rushed at my footwear and stuck her head in it. As I watched in amazement, Nitin, looking at her indulgently, said, "She has a foot fetish", more like a footwear fetish. After she was done sticking her head in, she smelled my boots, then licked them, oblivious to everything around her. I watched raptly for a few minutes and didn't hear Nitin asking me, "How was the traffic from Pune to Mumbai?" at first. "Thankfully, not very heavy."

First things first. I congratulated Nitin and Thomas on their marriage and sat beside Thomas on the settee, facing the TV, which was tuned to Republic TV (perceived by some as a right-wing channel). Nitin's Dad contentedly said, "I like this channel. They tell the truth as it is." I suppressed a giggle as Nitin made a horrified face.

I looked around. The other two cats were nowhere to be seen. But soon enough, Zsa-Zsa sauntered into the living room from a bedroom. The two feline queens ruled. The third feline, ironically named Tiger, who was the most timid cat I had ever seen, was no match for these two. Tiger was the most recent addition. He was rescued along with another cat by Thomas from an alley. Sadly, the other cat had not survived beyond a day.

As I enquired about Tiger, Nitin took me on a treasure hunt, looking for Tiger in nooks and crannies, on top of the cupboard, inside the innermost recesses of cupboards, under the bed, outside the windowsill. He was nowhere to be seen.

Finally, we succeeded in locating him. Nitin beckoned towards me. "See the exhaust fan of the AC?" he said, pointing to the fan installed over an iron grill outside the window, "You see the tail poking from below? That's Tiger." The most closeted cat I knew.

Nitin and Thomas are cat lovers. They would have loved to adopt more cats, but it was difficult to add new ones; the two feline queens couldn't stand anyone else encroaching on their territory. Nitin had rescued a kitten, Cleo, but after a couple of weeks of the two determined queens out to finish off their rival, Cleo had to be given to another willing home. It had been tough for them and Nitin's parents to ensure her survival.

Nitin's father called out to Thomas, "Chalo, Jamai-raje. khana laga hai." (Come, son-in-law, lunch is ready.) Just then, Nitin's Mom stepped out of the kitchen. We exchanged a few pleasantries as she brought out the last of the dishes for lunch from the kitchen. She slightly hobbled because of a bad knee, and when I told her that she should not stress herself, Nitin complained, "I have told her so many times. She just does not listen. She does not allow anyone to take over the kitchen." "Nahin, nahin, (no, no) the maid does everything. I don't do much," she said dismissively.

As we all sat down for lunch and were served parathas, salad, rice, dal, and papad, I noticed an unfamiliar item on my plate. On enquiry, Nitin's Mom said it was made of lotus stem, which had been cut into slices and fried (It is called 'Bhee ja pakoda'). It was a Sindhi recipe, and the lotus stem was available at a nearby shop.

Q: *As I savoured the lovely pakoda, I asked Nitin, "So tell me all about it (their marriage in New York)".*

Nitin: It's been 10 years since we have been in a relationship, after first meeting on a dating app, which was in 2009. We

dated for about three weeks before we decided to live together. It was around this time that the Delhi High Court Judgment ruled that Section 377 IPC was unconstitutional.

Interviewer's commentary:
The Judgment ruled that Section 377 IPC was unconstitutional to the extent that it criminalised same-sex relations between two consenting adults. Soon after the Judgment, an appeal was filed by conservatives and right-wingers in the Supreme Court.

Thomas: At that point, one of the crucial issues as far as our careers and relationship were concerned was whether we should migrate to a country that recognised same-sex couples. Nitin has a cousin in New Zealand and other cousins elsewhere. I also have many cousins abroad. I would have had to go abroad for studies and start a new career from scratch. My expenses on studies alone would have worked out to more than 30 lakh rupees, and Nitin would have had to bear most of it. Considering the nature of Nitin's work, he would not have found it easy to get a job there. So, after giving it some thought, we ruled out migration.

Nitin: You know, it has been over a year (2018) since the Supreme Court read down Section 377 of the IPC, and we are no longer criminals in the eyes of the law. It is a significant step forward, but in comparison to the West, we are still lagging in terms of our rights movement. Both of us knew that the next step, the fight for gay marriage, would be a long and bitter one. But we had a deep desire to get married. Of course, we couldn't legally be wed in India, and we are well aware that a marriage certificate from outside India carries no recognition here. Nevertheless, we felt that we wanted to make this commitment to each other.

We had planned this for a while but kept it a secret, until the very last moment. You remember I called you a week before we were to leave for the US and told you? (*I nodded.*) We

travelled to New York and were legally married in a civil ceremony on 2nd July 2019. My cousin, Sanjay, his wife, Dr. Komal, and their two daughters, who all stay in Texas, were the witnesses. Two first cousins of Thomas flew down from Canada and San Francisco, one of them with their husband, especially for the ceremony.

Thomas: After the wedding, Nitin's cousin and his wife took us to Texas on a long road trip. It took around a week. From New York to Buffalo and then down to New Orleans and Texas, where they reside. Nitin loved Niagara Falls and New Orleans.

Nitin: Oh, I forgot to mention. Two days before our wedding, we all —the two of us, my brother, and his family —attended World Pride 2019 in New York. As I was working at *Nomura* at the time, like all the *Nomura* delegates, we all wore company Pride T-shirts and distributed goodies to people watching us all along the route of the march. The morning after Pride, we went to the office of the New York City clerk in Brooklyn and applied for registration to get married.

Q: *Did you face visa issues?*

Thomas: No. The US immigration recognised me as Nitin's domestic partner. It was not an issue at all. Earlier too, on a 2013 trip to New Zealand, I was recognised as Nitin's domestic partner for visa purposes.

Nitin: We did have a bit of a problem with getting Thomas's passport renewed. Thomas's documents, such as the Aadhaar Card, did list my apartment's address, but the police kept asking us about our relationship. We were very clear that we were a gay couple staying together, but this was before the Supreme Court's Judgment of 2018 (on the constitutionality of Section 377 IPC), and they couldn't digest this fact. They visited us at home, verified our papers, and finally, after calling us over at the police station a couple of times, made

me file an Affidavit to the effect that Thomas is living at my address as my live-in partner and that I have no objection to him being issued a passport carrying my address.

Interviewer's commentary:
As Nitin spoke, I looked at Nitin's Mom. As she continually ensured that our plates were always full, I could see that she was content. I remembered the interview I had conducted with her, for my book Manachiye Gunti (Experience sharing by Parents of Gays and Lesbians).

In that story, she spoke about her struggle to accept her gay son. Her biggest worry had been whether Nitin would be happy. I remembered her, at the time of that interview, glancing at Nitin, who was sitting next to her, speaking about Nitin's previous relationship - "They had a breakup about 2-2.5 years ago. He became very depressed… For the past year or so, he has been in a relationship with another guy (Thomas)…. I worry. Will this relationship last? I can't bear to see Nitin miserable. But I also think that it's been three years since they have been together; they are settled. This relationship will last; Nitin will find happiness. But then again, I think, will their relationship overcome the age difference? Then again, I think, if their relationship is natural, I should accept whatever comes our way…"

After lunch, as we settled down in the living room, I turned to Thomas and said, "Thomas, how did..." I stopped; Nitin's Dad was ready to leave for work. I told him, "Considering your age, you should slow down a bit." He dismissed my suggestion with a wave of his hand, "No… No...No big deal. There is a pending case, and I need to visit the Income Tax office. See you. Do come again soon." Nitin looked exasperated. "He doesn't listen to anyone; in fact, he works even harder now."

Q: *After he left, I continued. Thomas, how did your parents react to your decision to get married to Nitin?*

Interviewer's commentary:
Thomas is a Malayali born and brought up in Chennai. He comes from a Catholic family. His father was a Deputy Superintendent of Police (DSP), and his mother was a teacher. He has an older brother. On realising that he was different from others in terms of his sexual orientation, he struggled to accept himself. The struggle had little to do with his being a Catholic (he is an atheist). It was because of the all-pervasive homophobia in the society. It had affected his studies, and he spiralled into depression.

Things began to change after he went off to stay with his aunt for a month after the 12th standard board exams and mulled about his sexuality and his future. He finally concluded that his orientation was not going to change, no matter what, and he might as well deal with it the best way he could. It was not true acceptance, but he was able to move on.

It was when he enrolled for B.Com in Loyola College (Chennai) (an all-boys college, by the way), and couldn't take his eyes off the handsome youth who walked its hallowed halls, that he realised that he was in denial about his sexual orientation. That realisation brought about acceptance.

Thomas: When I was in college, I first came out to my brother. He didn't say anything, and from the next day onwards, we went on as if the conversation had never happened. The next time I brought up the topic was around the time of his wedding. He asked, "You are still the same?" He was hoping it was a passing phase. His wife is a devout Catholic, and post-wedding, he became more intensely involved in religion, and that became the reason for his non-acceptance. He has issues with my parents accepting Nitin as my partner, as it was a sign of their acceptance of my sexuality.

I had been dropping hints to my Mom about my sexuality and when it became unbearable for her one night, she had insisted

on knowing. When I told her, she had a good cry and went through the usual queries that parents ask: "Are you impotent?" I had replied *(Thomas laughed naughtily as he recollected the answer,)* "Not with men for sure."

She had woken up my Dad from sleep, in a flurry *(the incident had happened late at night,)* but Dad had been calm. "It is a passing phase. Ignore it." In his quiet way, he gradually progressed through various stages of acceptance. Once, he told me, "Being in the police force, I know of these things. Let me tell you, it's not easy for people like you."

Interviewer's commentary:
But accepting a gay son is one thing. Adjusting to the fact that he is in a relationship with another man is a different ballgame. It takes a while for parents to accept a strange man in the family, and initially, Nitin's Mom was unhappy with Thomas coming over and staying with Nitin on weekends.

Nitin: It was not so much about the relationship, but I guess it was the discomfort of having a stranger in her house. *(Then he quipped,)* She didn't have an issue with a female stranger (a wife) becoming a part of the family.

Thomas: *(added with a big laugh,)* In fact, one day, she confronted me. "Do you know what you are doing with Nitin?" "Of course, I know." "Do you know the difference between your age and his?" "Yes, I know. I have no issues." "Do your parents know?" "No, but I will tell them."

Just then, Nitin came out of the bedroom. He was very embarrassed by this interrogation and became upset, so he decided to move in with me —this upset and hurt Nitin's Mom. But if we couldn't adjust to each other in the same house, Nitin was left with no choice. We would occasionally visit Nitin's parents. They started visiting us, and eventually, we all became comfortable enough to discuss buying a bigger home where all of us could stay together.

(After a pause, Thomas continued,) Our parents are glad that their son has a partner in his life who is devoted to him. Their biggest fear has been, 'Who will take care of their child after they are gone?' My Mom said that in so many words.

Q: *Have the in-laws met each other?*

Thomas: Yes, in fact, it was Nitin's Mom who had invited my parents for lunch. Only my Mom could make it. Initially, it was awkward for all of us, and other than a few cursory exchanges of remarks, there was not much to talk about. However, over time, they became more accepting of the situation. Now they visit each other and go out for lunch together. So, all good.

Nitin: It took a couple of years to reach that stage. After that we planned on moving to a house where we could all live comfortably. We started scouting for an apartment, and here we are. *(Later on, in 2022, they purchased another apartment close by, where Thomas' parents can move in so that they can take care of them in old age.)*

Interviewers' commentary:
We took a break. I stood up and turned to the window. Far off in the distance, a hill fully covered with shanties could be seen. "Are they more now than they were the last time I was here?" I wondered aloud, stretching. Nitin's Mom served us tea & biscuits, and we resumed our discussion over tea.

Q: *Were differences in your temperaments a serious challenge in the relationship?*

Nitin: Like others, we too have had our share of arguments, but, touch wood, so far none of our differences have reached an extent where we needed to seek counselling, but if we do, I don't think we would be shy of seeking support from an LGBTIQ inclusive counsellor or our close friends.

Interviewer's commentary:
I have seen gay couples isolate themselves from everybody else, which causes problems because they have no one to turn to in case they run into relationship issues.

Thomas: Yes. They need to understand that no one person can fulfil all our emotional and intellectual needs. We need to be social and have an independent life, too, with our friend circle. Cutting yourself off from everyone else is not good for the couple.

Interviewer's commentary:
We then moved on to more mundane but crucial matters of finance and logistical issues.

Thomas: Frankly, in the initial years of the relationship, we didn't sit down to work out how we would handle the day-to-day expenses. Each one chipped in as required. Initially, we did accounting at the end of the month to work out the expenses incurred by each, but we eventually gave it up. Another factor that impacted resource sharing was that, after leaving *The Humsafar Trust* in 2013, I didn't have a steady job for a couple of years, despite having an MBA qualification. There were periods when I was without a job, and Nitin would handle rent payments and most of the daily expenses. It was in 2016 that I became financially secure after I found a good job in Bengaluru and moved there.

Nitin: You know, talking of serious challenges, this was, in fact, one of our biggest challenges. Thomas was looking for a good job and eventually found one in Bengaluru. The company was also LGBTIQ-inclusive. Most of the jobs he had worked in Mumbai were below his capabilities. He had his career aspirations, and I supported his decision to move. But it was hard for both of us. We agreed to meet every month or so for a few days, alternating between Mumbai and Bengaluru. Luckily, Thomas's manager, who was aware of Thomas's relationship with me, was very understanding and

allowed Thomas to work from home for a couple of days when he visited me in Mumbai. The nature of my work allowed me to work from home, which was a significant benefit. As I had to look after my parents, there was no question of relocating to Bengaluru.

But we were both aware that this arrangement shouldn't last in the long term. Unlike some of the straight married couples who spend decades away from each other, meeting each other only during festivities, we were sure that was not how we wanted our relationship to be. We wanted quality time together, and while we respected each other's space, we had to be together sooner rather than later. So, after a couple of years, Thomas began looking for a job in Mumbai, and the moment he secured one, he moved back. We were so happy.

By this time, we were 100% sure that we would be together, come what may, and accordingly, we started working on various fronts – financial arrangements, the house, and medical insurance.

Each of us had a separate bank account, but we also decided to have one joint account. I feel it helps establish, if not the relationship, at least our association. It is essential to have such evidence, should it be required at a later stage, for example, for migration or a legal dispute. I had a relationship manager at the bank who knew me and my parents, as we all have accounts at the same bank. Coincidentally, Thomas also already had an account in the bank. So, it was not difficult for us to open a joint account, although we were not able to legally establish our relationship.

Interviewer's commentary:
Nowadays (in the year 2025,) things have improved; many banks allow two unrelated persons to open a joint account.

When it came to purchasing an apartment, we approached an LGBTIQ-inclusive construction company, Godrej

Properties, so they had no issues with a gay couple jointly purchasing an apartment. In general, my understanding is that builders don't care as long as they get the money. However, we encountered some issues when attempting to secure a joint loan to purchase an apartment. A private bank we were dealing with simply couldn't understand that we were a couple. They gave us the runaround, and we finally gave up. A similar incident occurred at another private bank, where the application was rejected without explanation. And this was a bank that claimed to be LGBTIQ-inclusive.

I believe that while many banks and other institutions may be somewhat inclusive about LGBTIQ, they don't make sufficient efforts to ensure that their policies and inclusion agenda permeate to the field level, where their employees and agents interact with customers and clients. That is a serious gap that most fail to address.

Finally, to our surprise, I found a government-run bank that accepted our application. The only condition they had was that, as I was earning more than Thomas, my name would be the first as the borrower, followed by Thomas' name. Note that in the property sale agreement, Thomas' name was first, followed by mine. So, one by one, things started falling into place.

When it came to medical insurance for Thomas, most of the companies I have worked for are multinational corporations (MNCs), and they are inclusive of LGBTIQ individuals. I suppose they must adhere to uniform international standards for LGBTIQ inclusion. One of my previous employers claimed to be LGBTIQ-inclusive. Still, when I tried to fill out a medical insurance coverage form with Thomas as my dependent, they wanted me to make an additional declaration about his relationship with me. Their declaration form was poorly designed, basically looking at same-sex couples as if their relationships are not on par with those of straight couples. They made excuses about this discrimination. But in

my current job, this is not an issue for us at all, and Thomas is covered as a dependent without any such humiliation.

Thomas: We are both out at our workplace and have listed the other as next of kin in our company to be contacted in case of an emergency.

Q: *Have you prepared Wills?*

Nitin: Both of us have prepared our Wills. Remember you *(Bindumadhav)* shared your draft with us? We used that as a template, but we have not registered it. You think we should register them?

Interviewer's commentary:
Yes, lest any of your relatives, especially the homophobic ones, challenge the Wills' authenticity. Since you can't get legally married to Thomas in India (as of now), my suggestion is to get an Advocate to check that the Wills are in proper format and register both the Wills as soon as possible.

Nitin: Speaking of gay marriage, where are we on filing a Petition?

Interviewer's commentary:
Following the Supreme Court's Navtej Johar Judgment of 2018, we were all eager to move on to the next significant battle in queer rights —the right of same-sex marriage. Soon after the Judgment, Nitin, Thomas and one other gay couple approached me to start work on the gay marriage petition. They had attempted to complete the online application form to get married under the Special Marriage Act, 1954. But by default, the website accepted one as a bridegroom and the other as a bride. The other gay couple had taken a hard copy of the application and had tried to submit it in person. The application had not been accepted; the authority responded that they had no directive to accept applications for gay marriages and directed them to the 'Inspector General (IG)

of Registration and Controller of Stamps' in Pune, Maharashtra. Both couples had approached me, and I had prepared a letter on their behalf for the IG of Registration and Controller of Stamps. I visited the office, but they did not accept the letter either and directed me to approach the State Health Department and Home Department. So I dispatched letters to the departments and as expected, that was a dead end. In the meantime, a gay couple from Kerala- Nikesh Pushkaran and Sonu MS, filed a gay marriage Writ Petition in the Kerala High Court (WP-C No. 2186/2020). Some others made moves to file similar petitions in the Delhi High Court.

I said, "I spoke to a Bombay High Court Advocate. He stated that if we need to file a petition for same-sex marriage in the Bombay High Court, we will have to find new grounds to do so. If not, there is a possibility that the Central Government may approach the Supreme Court and have all the petitions clubbed together for a hearing. If that happens, we will lose one level of appeal at the High Court level... the current CJI Dr Dhananjaya Chandrachud seems to be very liberal, and the community, including me, feels that this is the right time to push for gay marriage. There is not a snowball's chance in hell that the Central government will support this issue."

Nitin: Oh! They *(the Central government)* are completely against same-sex marriage. But even with the courts, don't be too optimistic. Remember how the Supreme Court reversed the Delhi High Court Judgment in the 377 case?

Interviewer's commentary:
Over the next few months, we attempted but were unable to find new grounds to file the same-sex marriage Petition in the Bombay High Court.

However, our fears about losing one level of appeal soon proved to be true. A same-sex marriage Petition was filed in the Supreme Court, followed by others. Nitin and Thomas

had no choice but to follow the others. I contacted Sr. Adv. Anand Grover and, under his guidance, Nitin and Thomas filed the same-sex marriage Petition challenging the Special Marriage Act, 1954 and the Foreign Marriage Act, 1969 (as their marriage in the USA was not legally recognised in India) in the Supreme Court.

Tragically, the Judgment went against us. It was a complete disaster, and we all felt that, barring Hon'ble Justice Sanjay Kishan Kaul, the rest of the Constitution Bench had completely let us down in denying our basic right to family. The mood was forlorn. The Central Government eventually established a Committee under the Cabinet Secretary to understand the practical issues faced by gay couples due to non-legal recognition of their relationship and called for suggestions from the public. I immediately drafted a list of issues and suggestions and sent a soft and hard copy to the Cabinet Secretary.

*On 11th November 2024, when I happily told Nitin that we had received a letter of acknowledgement from the Government, he wryly replied, "It takes very little to please you, Bindu."** That was true, and in a sudden burst of pain and anger at our helplessness, the frustration of being at the mercy of an insensitive and uncaring government, all I could do was rant against the Central Government and the Judiciary, in language which decency forbids me from noting here.*

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**On 9th January 2025, the Review Petitions on the gay marriage case were rejected by the Supreme Court of India.*

***As of July 2025, I have received no communication from the Committee on any action taken on any of the issues raised, suggestions given, in my letter.*

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Bindumadhav Khire is a LGBTIQ activist working in Pune (India) since 2000 on LGBTIQ rights. He has done his B.E. in Computer Science and has a degree in Law (LLB.) Bindumadhav retired from his IT career at the age of 35 and founded Samapathik Trust (2002) in Pune. In 2019 he founded Bindu Queer Rights Foundation.

He has authored numerous books on LGBTIQ (in Marathi and English,) organized Pune's Annual LGBTIQ Pride March for ten years, has run a helpline on sex, sexuality education, HIV/AIDS. He has been the organizer of Mooknayak- Annual Marathi LGBTIQ Literature Festival and Advait Pune Queer International Film Festival.

He has been director of HIV/AIDS Targeted Intervention Projects (funded by Pathfinder International and Maharashtra State AIDS Control Society) and has conducted numerous sessions on LGBTIQ health and rights for counseling students, medical students/practitioners, police personnel, students of journalism and mass communications, and corporates.

BOOKS/HANDBOOKS BY BINDUMADHAV KHIRE

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- Handbook of Basics of LGBTIQ Inclusion in the Workplace. Version 1.0. Bindumadhav Khire. Published by Bindu Queer Rights Foundation. 2023.
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- *Indradhanu: Samalaingikate che vividh ranga* (Rainbow: Different colours of Homosexuality.) Samapathik Trust, Pune. 2008.
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- *Antaranga.* (Experience Sharing by Gays and Lesbians.) Samapathik Trust, Pune. 2013.
- *Saptaranga*. (Experience Sharing by Transgenders.) Samapathik Trust, Pune. 2013.
- *Manachiye Gunti.* (Experience Sharing by Parents of Gays and Lesbians.) Samapathik Trust, Pune. 2013.

Bindumadhav Khire
(LGBTIQA Activist)

Rainbow Nests (Gay Relationships in India) by Bindumadhav Khire, is a comprehensive exploration of the experiences, challenges, and social contexts faced by gay couples in India. It combines personal narratives, interviews, legal context, and social commentary to present a nuanced picture of same-sex relationships in a country where legal recognition remains limited.

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